

MATTHEW·AUSTIN·

W·E·NORRIS·




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MATTHEW AUSTIN

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BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MDLE. DE MERSAC,' 'HIS GRACE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLS.

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MATTHEW AUSTIN



CHAPTER I

MATTHEW AUSTIN

‘ I OUGHT to be ashamed of myself,’ said Matthew Austin ;
‘ upon my word, I ought to be ashamed of myself ! What business has any man to be such a sybarite, while millions of his fellow-men are toiling from morning to night in coal-mines and hideous, stifling factories, without so much as knowing that they live in a beautiful world ? Millions upon millions who haven’t even been allowed to learn, except in the coarsest and most rudimentary way, what the gratification of the senses means—condemned to lifelong servitude, looking forward to no change for the better on this side of the grave, though many of them must dread a change for the worse and only a very few have some vague hope of compensation hereafter. It is really monstrous ; and even if their lot be inevitable, one hardly sees why they should accept it as such. We, the wealthy

and educated minority, shouldn't accept it if we were suddenly forced to change places with them and found ourselves in an overwhelming majority. Some day there will be a vast social upheaval, I suppose.'

He finished his glass of claret and gazed across the fine damask tablecloth, the polished silver, the bowls and vases of cut blooms which had suggested these reflections to him, till his eyes rested upon the sunny garden beyond, where, through the open French windows, brilliant parterres and flowering shrubs could be seen basking in the still warmth of a summer afternoon. He had been eating his luncheon in solitude, so that there was no one to argue with him or to point out the futility of quarrelling with that unequal distribution of wealth which statesmen, philosophers and divines have proclaimed, from time immemorial, to be the very foundation-stone of the social fabric. Presently he lighted a cigarette, not without a slight inward twinge of compunction—for the truth was that he could tolerate nothing save the very choicest tobacco and was somewhat ultra-fastidious in all his tastes.

'After all,' he resumed, in a more cheerful tone, 'it is health, not wealth, that has the last word. A rich man is only a little better off, and probably feels much worse off, than a mechanic when he is told that he can never be well again. And rich people are often unhappy. More often, perhaps, than poor people, who haven't time to brood over their sorrows. Poverty brings disease? Yes; but that subject is being dealt with, and in that direction there is something definite to work for. The bigger problem looks almost hopeless. All one can see

is that it will have to be taken in hand, and that there is no justification worth listening to for luxury and selfishness.'

This indolent cogitator was not—as may have been supposed from the foregoing soliloquy—a millionaire or a great territorial magnate; being, in fact, only a young doctor at an inland watering-place, whose professional earnings, scanty as yet, were supplemented by a small private fortune. Yet a comparatively small income will go far towards providing a bachelor so situated with those luxuries which Matthew Austin chiefly valued—pretty surroundings, good wine, a fair collection of etchings, a well-selected library and flowers all the year round—and if he was not rich, he had, within the limits of his desires, all that money could give him. So, at any rate, he thought; and more than once during this slack season of the year, when patients were few and he had leisure to consider his ways, he had accused himself of unwarrantable self-indulgence.

His poorer neighbours would scarcely have brought that charge against him; for, like many another member of his profession, he would take no payment from them (save, from time to time, an extremely modest sum, which he accepted to free their minds from a burdensome sense of obligation), nor was he wont to spare himself in their service. He was every whit as attentive to a costermonger's wife as he would have been to a duchess, had any duchesses resided within reach of Wilverton, while it was pretty well known that he expended a good deal more in charity than in the purchase of wine or choice etchings or bulbs for his

garden. Nevertheless, it remained true that he had a charming home and that most of those who sang his praises dwelt in crowded alleys or dark, ill-ventilated cottages.

‘There’s no getting over it,’ he murmured, as he rose and strolled towards the open window; ‘I’m too disgracefully happy and comfortable!’

He stood for a while in the recess formed by the window in the solid, oak-panelled walls of his old dwelling—a tall, slim figure, which conveyed an impression of vigour and activity, though of no great muscular strength. He was at this time just thirty years of age, and was accounted handsome by the unmarried ladies of Wilverton, to whose opinions respecting his personal appearance he had hitherto remained sublimely indifferent. His crisp, wavy hair was of a chestnut-brown colour, he wore a closely-cut reddish beard, and his dreamy grey eyes were shaded by long, curved lashes. His nose was too large and too undecided in outline for beauty, but to set against that he had a well-shaped, sensitive mouth, about which a faint smile continually hovered. If Matthew Austin was not strictly handsome, he was at least good-looking, and, what was perhaps more important, he had the unmistakable look of being a good fellow.

‘His face is his fortune,’ old Dr Jennings, who would fain have kept the whole practice of Wilverton to himself, would sometimes growl; ‘patients are bound to flock to a man who has the trick of looking so confoundedly sympathetic!’

As a matter of fact, he looked sympathetic for the simple reason that he was so. He generally knew, or thought he

knew, how other people were feeling; a gift which has its drawbacks as well as its advantages. For example, he could seldom bring himself to scold his gardener (who often deserved to be scolded), because he was perfectly well aware that Bush, notwithstanding an assumption of stolid, surly unconcern when rebuked, was, in reality, mortified beyond all measure by the mildest remonstrance. It was, however, imperative that Bush should be remonstrated with that afternoon, and in a few minutes his master stepped resolutely forward to say what must be said. Crossing the smooth-shaven lawn, and guided by the sharp, recurrent click-click of a pair of shears, he soon came upon this thick-set, grey-bearded retainer of his, who was busily engaged in clipping a dwarf hedge, and who forestalled him by remarking,—

‘Terrible weather for gardens, sir! No rain, nor yet no prospect o’ none, and everythin’ perishin’, as you may say, for want o’ water. ’Tis enough to break a man’s ’eart!’

‘But why should we break our hearts, and why should everything perish, when we possess a hose, in respect of which I am charged an additional water-rate of five pounds a year?’ Mr Bush’s employer pertinently inquired.

‘There’s a deal of ’arm done to plants by over-waterin’, sir—a deal of ’arm,’ answered the old gardener sententiously.

‘Oh, but not to *our* plants, Bush. They may suffer from mismanagement in many ways, and I am afraid some of them do, but surely not in that way!’

Bush sniffed in an aggrieved manner, but made no articulate reply. He hated the labour of manipulating a hose, and

nobody knew better than he how effective a weapon judicious silence is.

‘And talking about mismanagement,’ Mr Austin went on; ‘I must say, Bush, that I wish you had treated those bouvardias as I told you to treat them. Not one of them will turn out satisfactorily now.’

Bush sniffed again, and continued to clip with tremendous energy. It was one of his exasperating habits to work vigorously and to make as much noise as possible over it, while he was being spoken to, thus delicately implying, not only that he was far too conscientious a man to waste time, but that he attached very little importance to his master’s views upon the subject of horticulture.

Matthew Austin kept up the monologue as long as he could. He had various complaints to make, and he was determined to make them. But before he had quite reached the end of his list, his patience and his severity alike gave out.

‘I suppose it isn’t much use,’ he said, laughing; ‘I suppose you will take your own way, whatever I may tell you to do. But you’re wrong, all the same.’

‘Maybe so, sir,’ answered Bush imperturbably. ‘I’m a mortal man, liable to horror, same as yourself, sir—though with more years’ experience in the growin’ of plants. I’ve heerd tell as even doctors makes their mistakes now and again, sir—killin’ of folks as might ha’ been kep’ alive.’

Matthew Austin laughed again.

‘Oh, yes, we make mistakes,’ he admitted; ‘much of our work is guess-work, just as yours is. Some of us are

obstinate, too, and cling to old methods after we have been shown the superiority of new ones—quite like gardeners.’

‘Not like me, sir,’ corrected Mr Bush; ‘*I* ain’t never too proud to larn.’

‘Only you haven’t yet been fortunate enough to meet with the man who could teach you anything, eh? That is exactly where you resemble a considerable number of medical practitioners.’

Bush laid down his shears, straightened his back and surveyed the speaker with a smile of benevolent compassion.

‘Lor’ bless ‘ee, sir,’ said he, ‘t ain’t no manner o’ good to go ahead too fast! Noo methods?—well, I ain’t agin’ tryin’ of ‘em; on’y when I tries ‘em I don’t say nowt about it. For why? ‘Cause I don’t want to pass for a born fool. Same with your own perfession, sir. “Drugs,” says you to a sick person, “ain’t a-goin to make you well, and drugs you sha’n’t have.” What follers? Why, that sick person sends for hold Jennings, who gives him pills and draughts to his ‘eart’s content. “Now, I’ve got summat for my money,” thinks he. Your way might be the right way, sir; but you didn’t owt to have said so—no, that you didn’t! Bread pills and ‘armless mixtures o’ many colours you should have give him, sir—and kep’ your patient. You’ll excuse the liberty o’ me mentionin’ it, sir, but it do reelly grieve me to ‘ear what people says and to see you losin’ fine opportounities through sheer foolishness—if I may make bold for to call it so.’

The young doctor seemed to be more amused than affronted by this plain language.

‘Why should you wish me to be a humbug, Bush?’ he asked.

‘‘Cause ’tis the way o’ the world, sir,’ replied Bush, resuming his occupation. ‘‘Cause human natur’ is human natur’ —ah! and will be long after you and me has no further call for physic.’

Well, it was likely enough that this old fellow had acquired some knowledge of human nature, and perhaps—as Matthew reflected while he sauntered away—the said knowledge had been turned to account in his dexterous elusion of the subject more immediately under discussion. Nevertheless, Mr Austin was not greatly alarmed by the note of warning which had been sounded for his benefit. He had not yet been a year at Wilverton, and, all things considered, he had done pretty well. Of course, Dr Jennings, the established medical authority of the place, and the chief advertiser of its mineral springs, which, fashionable in the last century, had since fallen into disrepute, had retained the great majority of the rich winter visitants; still, a few rather interesting cases had come in his own way, and he had had the satisfaction of treating them successfully. For the rest, he did not hesitate to advise a course of baths and water-drinking to gouty and rheumatic sufferers, the springs being really efficacious against their maladies, and although it was true that he had little faith in drugs, that scepticism was hardly so much of a drawback to him, in a place where such a number of glasses of water had to be swallowed daily, as it might have been elsewhere. He had no doubt that he would get on—if, indeed, ‘getting on’ in a pecuniary sense were the chief aim and object of a man’s existence.

Personally, he did not hold that view. He had, as has

been mentioned, a little money of his own ; he had secured a charming old house and a garden, in the progress of which he was profoundly interested ; he had no thought of marrying, and he loved his profession. Had he not every reason to describe himself as happy and comfortable?—whether disgracefully so or not. His earlier years had been by no means exempt from unhappiness and discomfort ; for his family had strenuously opposed his choice of an occupation, and indeed there had been a time when his parents had almost gone the length of disowning him. Probably they would have gone that length but for the invincible sweetness of his disposition and the impossibility of quarrelling with a man who refuses to be quarrelled with. But this was now an old story. His father and mother were both lying silent in the family vault down in Essex, and his brother, the present Sir Godfrey Austin, who had succeeded to the family honours, the not very extensive family acres and the seat in Parliament which might also be regarded as almost a family appanage, had not inherited all the family prejudices. The present Sir Godfrey, a dull, worthy, middle-aged personage, saw no particular reason why Matthew should not be a doctor, though the taste struck him as an eccentric one.

The late Sir Godfrey would have seen every reason why his son should at least not be a provincial doctor ; and, indeed, Matthew himself would have preferred to develope into the celebrated London physician that he might, and perhaps would, have become, had not a long and dangerous illness played havoc with his prospects. But it had not been for the sake

of social standing that he had coveted such advancement, nor was he personally ambitious. He was glad enough and thankful enough to have recovered—as he had now almost completely done—from the blood-poisoning which, through a mishap at one of the hospitals, had all but cost him his life, and he did not regret having yielded to the kindly solicitations of his metropolitan colleagues, who had urged him to seek lighter work and a fresher air. Well, the air of Wilverton was as fresh as could be desired; as for the work, it was perhaps just a trifle too light during the summer months for an active man. This was what he was thinking when he returned to the house, and, picking up a treatise upon chrysanthemum culture, ensconced himself in an easy-chair. Easy-chairs and the culture of chrysanthemums were all very well, but at his time of life he ought to have had rather less leisure for making acquaintance with either; possibly Bush had not been altogether in the wrong; possibly he had made a mistake in neglecting opportunities for extending his regular practice. Certain it was that neither the town residents nor the neighbouring gentry had as yet shown much inclination to transfer their favours to him from pompous old Dr Jennings, though some of them had coyly nibbled. Doubtless these would have bitten, had he seen fit to bait his hook with the innocuous specifics which human nature demands as aids to faith, and not a few of them would have done wisely to bite—‘For the truth is,’ reflected Matthew, with an amused smile, as he recalled certain consultations, ‘that poor, dear old Jennings knows nothing at all.’

As chance would have it, an influential and irascible patient of Dr Jennings's was at that same moment saying, in more forcible language, the very same thing; and so it came to pass that the student of horticulture had not dawdled through very many pages of complicated instructions when his servant entered the room, bearing a large square envelope upon a salver.

'A groom has just brought this from Hayes Park, and he was to wait for an answer, if you please, sir,' the man said.

Matthew tore open the note, glanced hastily at its contents and nodded.

'All right,' said he; 'I will be there as soon as possible. Just tell James to put the mare into the trap, will you?'

Then, while he was waiting, he reopened the missive addressed to him, which was written in a dashing Italian hand, and in a style more original than lucid.

'Mrs Frere presents her compliments to Mr Austin, and would be *very* much obliged if he would come *at once* and see her little daughter, who, she fears, is suffering from incipient diphtheria or something dreadful of that kind. At least, it *looks* like it, and Mr Frere quite thinks so too, and, of course, this makes us terribly anxious. So will Mr Austin please come *without delay*, and the dog-cart should have been sent, only it seems that the boys have taken it out without ever saying a word—of course, before they knew that their sister was so ill. But perhaps Mr Austin has a dog-cart of his own. Or, if not, he might take a fly.'

Mr Austin had a dog-cart of his own. As, moreover, he was the lucky possessor of a roan mare considerably fleetier than anything in Mr Frere's stables, he felt pretty confident of reaching Hayes Park in advance of his verbal response. Presently he was bowling at a rapid pace along the highways and byways, his reins hanging loose in his hand—for a more careless driver never lived—while his eyes wandered to right and left over the ripening corn-fields and the woods, where patches of russet and yellow were already discernible.

'She sounds like a dear old lady,' he thought, smiling retrospectively; 'I wonder whether she talks as she writes. Mr Frere, of course, one has seen—and listened to—at the club; but I don't remember to have heard anything about his family. I hope it isn't really a case of diphtheria: when once that gets into a house— There is no need to anticipate the worst, though. Posterity ought to be much happier than we are a century or two hence, when miasmatic diseases will have been exterminated. Only then, I suppose, other problems will have to be faced, which look uncommonly awkward at this distance.'

He went on, as his habit was, with these and similar disconnected musings until his groom, who had been murmuring directions in his ear from time to time, said suddenly,—

'Off side, please, sir, through the iron gates. *Oh, Lord!*'

'It's all right, James,' laughed Mr Austin, glancing over his shoulder at his agitated henchman; 'I have never yet turned you out at a corner, and the chances are that I never shall. Dear me! what a beautiful old place!'

It certainly was a very beautiful old Tudor edifice that

came within the field of his vision as he drove up the gentle ascent which led towards it between two parallel rows of magnificent limes, and in days of yore the Freres of Hayes Park had been county magnates of the first water; but now, like many other county magnates, they had to keep up a large establishment upon a lamentably reduced rent-roll, and, this being impossible, the large establishment was no longer maintained. Half the house was permanently closed, the gardens were neglected, while the vast stables had seldom more than three occupants at a time. When it is added that Mr Frere was the father of six children, some of whom had cost, and were costing, him a good deal of money, allowance will doubtless be made for the irritability which was a prominent feature in an otherwise amiable character. Moreover, he had, on an average, at least two sharp fits of gout every year, which is more than any man's temper can be expected to stand.

And indeed it was of his gout, not of his daughter's illness, that the fussy, little white-haired man began to speak as soon as the sound of wheels upon the gravel brought him out to the doorstep.

'Come in—come in—very glad to see you!' said he. 'I shall hope to consult you in future, when I have occasion for it. That fellow Jennings is past all bearing! I told him so plainly the last time he was here. "What's the use of you?" I said. "That's what I want to know. What's the use of you? Here am I, getting worse instead of better, and you can't even suggest anything!" Because, hang it all!

I don't call it a suggestion to prescribe a course of Wilverton waters. No, no ; I've lived here, man and boy, for a matter of sixty-five years, and you don't take me in with nonsense of that sort. So I made no bones about it ; I said, "Look here, Jennings, I've had a lot of patience with you, and it's very evident to me that you're no good. Now, I'm going to try younger blood ; I'm going to send for Mr Austin." He told me I could do as I pleased. Do as I pleased !—I should rather think I could ! The deuce is in it if a man mayn't choose his own doctor.'

'But I understood that it was to see your daughter that I was sent for to-day,' Matthew ventured to observe.

'Oh, poor little Maggie—yes, to be sure ! Only a feverish cold, I hope ; but Mrs Frere worked herself up into a state of mind. You know what women are. Come along and look at your patient ; I'm sure you'll say it's nothing serious. Jennings would have pulled a long face, and set about drawing up a long bill at once. That's his little way—confound him !'

CHAPTER II

THE FRERE FAMILY

MR FRERE led the way up a broad, shallow staircase, lighted by a great stained-glass window, upon which coats of arms and heraldic devices were emblazoned. Then there was a long, oak-panelled corridor to be traversed before the old gentleman paused, with his hand upon a swing-door covered with red baize.

‘These are the children’s quarters,’ he explained. ‘In days gone by, when there was always a certain number of visitors, it was thought desirable to exclude the youngsters; but I don’t know why we shouldn’t economise labour by stowing ’em away in some of the empty spare rooms now. We’re more than half shut up as it is, and the furniture dropping to pieces, they tell me. Can’t afford a lot of housemaids, you see. What the deuce is going to become of us poor landowners is more than I can guess! It’s all very fine for farmers to talk about being ruined, but—well, what price are you paying for hay now?’

‘I can’t quite say,’ answered Matthew, who, in truth, could seldom quite say what price he was paying for anything. ‘Something like £8 a ton, I think.’

‘The devil you are! Ah, well! the farmer and the con-

sumer are swindled, I've no doubt ; but that's a poor consolation for the landlord who can't get his rents. Now, it just comes to this, you know ; are we to be exterminated, or are we not ? I take it that, as a class, we are the most patient and the most ill-used body of men in the entire community. We make no outcry ; we go on paying our rates and taxes—and pretty heavy they are, too !—without a murmur ; we submit to be treated as though we were rich, when most of us don't know where to turn for a spare five-pound note, by George ! But we have our rights, mind you, even though we aren't Socialists or Fenians or agricultural labourers. Yes, we have our rights, and a time may come when we shall be driven to fight for them.'

Matthew began to wonder whether the time would ever come for him to be conducted to his patient ; but, just as he was about to offer a gentle reminder that he was a physician, not a politician, the swing-door was opened from the other side, giving passage to a tall, fair-haired girl, who may have been drawn to the spot by the stentorian voice of the aggrieved landowner.

'Oh, there you are, Anne !' Mr Frere said, in a slightly reproachful tone, as though he had been searching in vain for this young lady. 'Well, I have brought Mr Austin, you see—my daughter Anne, Mr Austin. How is Maggie now ?—and what has become of your mother ?'

'Mamma has gone downstairs to write some letters before the post leaves ; Maggie seems to be a little more feverish, and her head aches a good deal,' replied Miss Frere, after bowing to the doctor.

She had a low-pitched, musical voice Matthew noticed. For the rest, being anxious to get over preliminaries and proceed to business, he did not notice much about her, except that she was remarkably tall and remarkably fair.

‘Oh, well, a headache—of course she has a headache,’ Mr Frere returned rather testily; ‘that doesn’t prove anything. Now, Mr Austin, if you will be so kind as to follow Anne, she will show you the child’s bedroom. I’ll take myself off out of your way for the present; but Mrs Frere will like to see you by-and-by. You will find us both in the drawing-room after you have made your examination.’

Matthew Austin, like most doctors, had two manners, and the professional manner which he assumed, as soon as Miss Frere had led him into the sick-room, was a very quiet and somewhat distant one. He was not fond of being spoken to or interfered with while at work, nor were bystanders encouraged to loquacity by his impassive reticence. However, neither Miss Frere nor the old nurse, who was seated by the bedside of the sufferer, a bright-eyed little maiden of fourteen, ventured to interrogate him, save with their eyes, and they answered the ‘few questions that he put to them briefly and intelligently enough. The sight of the stethoscope which he presently produced seemed to alarm them both; but they heroically held their peace when, after using it, he replaced it in his pocket, and it was Maggie who broke the silence by asking, in a small, awestruck voice,—

‘Oh, please, am I going to die?’

‘Yes,’ answered the doctor, his features relaxing into a

smile, 'we are all going to die; but we all mean to live as long as we can, and you are rather more likely to keep your ninetieth birthday than most of us. To-night you will have some medicine which will do your head good and won't be at all nasty, and to-morrow, I hope, you will be feeling much better. Only you must make up your mind to stay in bed for the present.'

Miss Frere followed him out into the passage, and he replied at once to her unspoken query.

'Oh, no, I don't think so; unfavourable symptoms would have been almost certain to show themselves by this time, if there had been anything of the sort. I must not speak quite positively until to-morrow; but in all probability there is nothing the matter, beyond a rather severe chill.'

'Oh, thank you!' exclaimed the girl, with a look of such heartfelt gratitude that he laughed outright.

'Do you know,' said he, 'that you pay us a very poor compliment when you thank us—as most of you do—for telling you that there is no reason to be alarmed? You treat us as the savages treat their medicine-men; you seem to think that diseases and cures are at our beck and call.'

'I suppose we do,' she answered, smiling; 'but perhaps, after all, that is just as well. Isn't faith half the battle?'

'Oh, it goes a long way, no doubt. Faith helps to make the world go round, and even misdirected faiths are better than none. Considering how ignorant we all are, that faculty of firm, illogical belief which I can see by your face that you possess is an immense blessing.

The girl drew herself up slightly. Perhaps she did not particularly care about being told what conclusions this stranger had drawn from a scrutiny of her features; perhaps, also, she failed to see why she should be called stupid by implication. But Matthew Austin had not meant to bring any accusation of that kind against her, nor was he in the least conscious of having given offence. He was something of a physiognomist; he had an absent-minded trick of saying what he thought, and, as Miss Frere stood beside him, with the light of the sinking sun upon her face, he had taken rapid note of certain indications connected with her eyes and the set of her lips. To tell the truth, the interest which she had aroused in him was but momentary, and he at once recollected that the anxious parents were waiting for him below.

‘I must go down and reassure your father and mother,’ he said. ‘I will look in again to-morrow morning, when I shall fully expect to find my patient convalescent.’

She did not offer to show him where the drawing-room was—which omission on her part may possibly have caused his thoughts to recur to her while he descended the staircase; for the fact was, that such young ladies as he had hitherto met in Wilverton and its vicinity had shown no sort of inclination to leave him to himself. Of the young lady who was thus exceptional his mind’s eye retained a clear impression, and his inward remark was that she was doubtless one of the reigning local beauties. It was little that he knew about beauties or prevailing fashions in beauty, local or

otherwise. Had he been better posted, he would have recognised that Miss Frere's comeliness belonged to a type which, for the time being, has ceased to command universal admiration. The low, broad forehead, the straight nose and the arched eyebrows were well enough; but the general effect, enhanced by an almost total absence of colouring, was somewhat too cold and severely classical for modern taste. Anne Frere's hair was of so light a flaxen as to be within a few shades of white, her cheeks were always pale, and her eyes could only be called blue because they were not grey. Her mouth, too, though there was no fault to be found with its shape, was scarcely the sort of mouth which the young man of the present day honours with his approbation, while her expression did not vary much or frequently. Nevertheless, she was admitted to be handsome; and the fact that she was so was merely an unimportant detail in Matthew Austin's concise summing up of her.

'Strong constitution, but slow circulation,' was what he said to himself as he made his way downstairs. 'Evidently a good girl, and probably the mainstay of the household; for one can guess that her father and mother are not very efficient people. I wonder why she isn't happy, and what that quiet, resigned look means? Pecuniary difficulties?—or an unfortunate attachment, perhaps? Well, she'll pull through her trouble, whatever it may be, for she has too much pride and too much courage to be peevish—not to mention the faith. One doesn't like to see that look upon the face of such a young girl, though.'

In the hall he was met by Mr Frere, whose long sigh of

satisfaction, on hearing his favourable report, gave evidence of an anxiety which had not been confessed.

‘I was sure of it!’ the old gentleman exclaimed triumphantly; ‘I was sure you would take a common-sense view. Now Jennings, as I told Mrs Frere, would have kept us on tenter-hooks for a week and then pretended that he had saved the child’s life. Come in and see my wife. It wouldn’t be the slightest use for *me* to try and convince her that she had made all this fuss about nothing.’

Matthew was conducted into a room of immense length, which, as he noticed during his rapid progress towards the farther end of it, was filled with beautiful things. Poverty, after all, is a relative term, and if the Chippendale furniture, the inlaid tables and cabinets, the rare old china and the countless silver knick-knacks were heirlooms, certain screens and bits of embroidery and other products of Egypt and Japan looked like purchases of recent date. The owner of that drawing-room, Matthew reflected, must be a woman possessed of refined tastes, as well as the means of gratifying them; and, indeed, the owner of the drawing-room, when she rose from her writing-table to greet him, struck him as being in admirable harmony with her surroundings.

Mrs Frere was a charming old lady, who might almost have passed for a young lady, if her hair had not been as white as her husband’s; for neither time nor trouble had furrowed her smooth cheeks. Her small, slim figure was that of a girl; her pretty face was that of a baby; her manner, too, had retained the childish simplicity which, during fifty odd years, had made her

at once the pet and the laughing-stock of her friends and relatives. She was, as Matthew presently discovered, a little deaf; but even that provoking infirmity, which is so apt to destroy the popularity of less favoured mortals, was, in her case, an additional charm, lending a certain piquancy to her inconsequent remarks.

‘I am so very glad George persuaded me to send for you, said she, with amusing candour, after the young doctor had allayed her fears. ‘I was rather against it, you know—do sit down—I was rather against it, because of poor old Dr Jennings, who will naturally feel hurt. Still, if he only knew it, it is really much better for him not to come here any more. Latterly, I have been kept in a constant state of terror lest one of his visits should end in his being kicked down the steps by George, who is quite dangerous when he has a fit of gout coming on. Yes, George dear, I see you making faces at me, but I am not saying anything imprudent; I am sure you have told Mr Austin all about your grievances by this time. And so you really think my poor little Maggie is all right?’

‘Oh, no,’ answered Matthew, laughing. ‘I haven’t pronounced her all right yet; but I hope there will be an improvement within a few hours after she has taken her medicine, which I am going to send to her from the chemist’s as I go back. I shall see her again to-morrow morning, and unless she becomes more feverish during the night—’

‘Oh, but why should you hurry back?’ interrupted Mrs Frere. ‘Why shouldn’t we send for the medicine? Then you might stay and dine with us and watch the effect of it, which

would be *so* much nicer! George, couldn't you persuade Mr Austin to stay and dine?'

Mr Frere threw up his hands deprecatingly.

'Just listen to her!' he ejaculated; 'that's my wife all over! As if a busy man had nothing better to do than to take pot-luck with his patients in order to suit their convenience. Not that I shouldn't be only too delighted to offer you our humble hospitality, but I really haven't the impudence to suggest such a thing.'

'But I am not at all busy,' Matthew answered, 'and, as a matter of fact, I should rather like, if I could, to watch the effect of the medicine. May I send my man to Wilverton for it, and tell him to bring me my dress-clothes at the same time?'

If Dr Jennings had been unceremoniously invited to dine at Hayes Park (only he never would have been so invited), his acknowledgment of the honour conferred upon him would have been very ceremonious indeed. He would have bowed down to the ground, his round, rubicund face would have assumed a richer tint; probably he would have consulted his note-book and murmured that he might just be able to manage it; certainly he would not have said, as Matthew presently did,—

'Then I'll leave you to finish your letters. I shall go and try to amuse Miss Maggie until it is time to dress. Don't bother about me; I can always get on with children.'

Mr Austin was allowed, after some perfunctory protests, to employ himself as he pleased, and when, about two hours later, he again met his hostess, she ingenuously told him what a pleasing contrast he presented to his predecessor.

'One can't expect provincial doctors to be gentlemen, you know,' said she, 'and of course it is a great piece of good luck to chance upon one who is. Especially if he is a good doctor into the bargain—as I am sure you are. It is such a bore to have to deal with people who think they oughtn't to mention one's inside without apologising, isn't it?'

'If I had anything wrong with my inside, I should prefer a good doctor to a gentleman,' remarked Matthew; but Mrs Frere did not hear him.

'I remember your father quite well,' she went on; 'I used often to meet him at parties in the days of our prosperity, when we had a London house. Now we are so dreadfully short of money that even a month of the season in a hotel or lodgings can't be thought of—which is unfortunate on poor, dear Anne's account. Personally, I can't say that I so very much mind being poor. I am quite contented to stay at home and look after the garden; though I do wish George could spare me a little more to spend upon bulbs. Didn't somebody tell me that you were a great gardener? That is delightful, because it provides one with a subject, and really, in these parts, there is nothing, as a rule, to talk about, except one's neighbours.'

If Mrs Frere was given to talking about her neighbours, she certainly was not given to speaking ill of them, nor had she ever been known to be at a loss for subjects of conversation. She prattled on, after Matthew had led her into the spacious, dimly-lighted dining-room, wandering from one topic to another, and paying little heed to his replies, while he amused himself with mental notes upon the remaining members of the small party.

The tall, handsome young fellow who had been introduced to him as 'our boy Harry,' and who was about to join his regiment in India ; Dick, a curly-headed lad of sixteen or thereabouts, who would shortly be returning to Eton ; Anne, whose flawless complexion and white shoulders were set off to advantage, he noticed, by the low-cut black dress that she wore—all these kept up a ceaseless flow of chatter which neither interrupted nor was interrupted by their mother's placid monologue.

'Nice, simple, happy sort of people,' Matthew thought ; 'all except the girl, who seems more complicated and less happy. I must try to have a talk with her afterwards and find out more about her.'

The bachelors who dwelt within reach of Hayes Park could have told him that it was not so easy to arrive at a comprehension of Miss Frere, most of them having tried their hands at her, and having ended by pronouncing her too stiff and 'stand-off' to merit continued exertions. There was very little stiffness, however, in her manner towards Mr Austin, whom she addressed several times across the table, and whose previous unintentional familiarity she seemed to have forgotten or forgiven.

'What did you do to Maggie after you turned nurse and me out of the room?' she asked. 'I went to see her just before dinner, and she said you had only been playing dominoes with her, but I can hardly believe that a game of dominoes will cure a sore throat.'

'It won't do that,' answered Matthew, 'but it will sometimes act as a febrifuge. Besides, we were talking as well as playing.'

'I should rather think you were!' remarked Dick, with a

chuckle. 'If ever there lived a girl who could talk the hind leg off a donkey, that girl is Maggie.'

'Ah, but she won't talk to everybody, and she has been quiet enough all day, poor child,' Miss Frere said. 'Yet, Mr Austin rebuked me just now for treating him, as he said, like a medicine-man. Why, that is exactly what he is! Aren't medicine-men supposed to work cures without much help from medicine, and don't they work upon the minds rather than the bodies of their patients?'

'And no fools they!' cried Mr Frere. 'Give me a doctor who will cheer me up and tell me I shall be all right in a day or two. How the dickens can I be expected to get well when a fellow shakes his head over me and says a mild attack of gout generally lasts for a month or six weeks? The very next time that I feel a premonitory twinge, I shall send off post-haste for the medicine-man, I can tell you.'

Thus it was that Matthew Austin obtained a nickname which clung to him and was eventually used by many persons who knew nothing of the time and place of its origin. At the moment he scarcely noticed it, but remarked, laughing,—

'Now, doesn't this show how impossible it is to please everybody? You seem inclined to praise me for adopting the very system which my gardener solemnly warned me, this afternoon, would be my ruin if I persisted in it. His notion is that drugs may not be of much use, but that human nature is so constituted that no sick person will consent to be cured without them—and I am by no means sure that he is wrong.'

'Then,' observed Miss Frere, 'your gardener means just what

you mean. All the same, I am glad you took his advice and wrote a prescription for Maggie. Credulous as I am, I do feel more comfortable with a few outward and visible aids to faith.'

Well, at any rate, Mr Austin's method of treatment proved effectual, whether he was indebted to his prescription or not, and when he drove home by moonlight, he had the double satisfaction of reflecting that he had left his patient sound asleep and had added to the list of his friends. Both Mr and Mrs Frere had expressed in warm terms their gratitude, as well as the pleasure that it had given them to make his acquaintance at last ; the boys had made him promise to go out rabbit-shooting with them some day and he had undertaken to fulfil the dearest wish of Maggie's heart by procuring a dormouse for her. However, he had not succeeded in making any fresh discoveries about Anne, who had retired to her sister's room immediately after dinner and had only reappeared to say good-night. The curiosity that he felt respecting her might, in the case of any other man, have been the prelude to tenderer emotions ; but Matthew was not of an amorous temperament.

'Perhaps,' said he to himself, as he grazed the gate-post on turning out into the high road, 'it is only a tendency towards anæmia after all.'

CHAPTER III

IN MRS FRERE'S GARDEN

AS had been anticipated, Maggie's illness proved to be a comparatively trifling affair; still, it was necessary to keep watch over her for a few days, lest more serious developments should arise out of it, and for a few days, therefore, Matthew was able with a clear conscience to pay that morning visit to Hayes Park which his patient implored him on no account to omit. She had fallen in love with him, as his patients invariably did, and insisted upon his remaining with her for a good hour on each occasion, during which time she monopolised nearly the whole of the conversation, only pausing every now and again to listen to his instructions as to the care of the dormouse, which he had not forgotten to purchase for her.

Sometimes these interviews were interrupted by the entrance of other members of the family, whose loquacity was at least equal to that of its youngest scion; sometimes, also, Miss Frere, the sole exception in that respect to the general rule, would look in to protest against such ruthless frittering away of a professional man's precious moments; but Matthew always declared that he had nothing particular to do, while Maggie averred that he was there by his own free will and pleasure. 'He likes it, Anne. He says he likes it, and he wouldn't say he did if he didn't,

because that would be a fib, you know.' Which seemed unanswerable.

But a day came when common honesty compelled Miss Maggie's medical attendant to announce that he must take leave of her in his professional capacity. Her governess, who had been absent on a holiday, had returned, and he felt bound to certify that she was in a fit state to resume her studies. This communication, which was very ill-received upstairs, was not welcomed even in the drawing-room.

'Oh, *how* tiresome of you!' Mrs Frere exclaimed. 'And all this time you have been so taken up with Maggie that I have never managed to show you my garden. You haven't been out rabbiting with the boys either; but I suppose we mustn't be too exacting. Does this mean that we are to see no more of you until one of us contrives to fall ill?'

'Oh, I hope not,' answered Matthew, laughing. 'I am such a wretched shot that I think I had better leave the rabbits to your sons; but I should like very much to see the garden some afternoon, if you will let me.'

'Then—let me see—could you come over and lunch on Saturday? Poor Harry has to sail from Portsmouth on Thursday, and Dick goes back to school the next day; so we shall all be feeling very lonely and miserable, and it would be kind of you to look in upon us and cheer us up. Mr Frere will be very cross, I am afraid; but you mustn't mind him. As for Anne, she will be weeping into her plate and drying her eyes with her napkin, poor thing, as she always does when her brothers have to leave her. At my time

of life,' added Mrs Frere, with a comfortable sort of sigh, 'one learns to look out for consolations. The garden is one, and you, if you are good-natured, will be another.'

So Matthew was good-natured, and when he reached Hayes Park on the appointed day, he found the reduced party somewhat less dismal than he had been led to expect. The head of the house, to be sure, was a trifle choleric and fell foul of the servants upon small provocation; but Anne shed no tears in public, nor did she fail to put in an occasional remark as often as her mother allowed her a chance of so doing. However, she retired immediately on the conclusion of the meal, after which Mrs Frere, taking up an old straw hat and a sunshade, said,—

'Now light your cigar and prepare yourself to make any amiable speeches that you can about a semi-wilderness. Once upon a time we used to pride ourselves upon our lawns and shrubs, not to speak of our flowers; but what can one do with only four men to attend to everything? George, dear, I don't think we will take you; you are so depressing with your lamentations. Besides,' she added, turning to her guest, without lowering her voice, 'I never like him to see the conservatories if I can help it, because he at once begins to talk about cutting down expenses, and, even as it is, I have had to abandon orchids altogether.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' cried Mr Frere; 'you gave up orchids because your fool of a gardener couldn't grow 'em; don't make me responsible for things that I've nothing to do with. I couldn't have induced you to relinquish a single

exotic—or a double one either, for the matter of that—if I had tried.'

'Yes, dear, do go out for a ride,' returned his wife placidly ; 'I am sure Mr Austin will excuse you. You can have the cob, now that the boys are gone, and a good shaking-up will put you into better spirits.'

It was true enough that four men did not suffice to keep the lawns and alleys and borders round about Hayes Park in trim ; still, Matthew's cry of surprise and admiration, after he had followed his hostess to the broad terrace on the south side of the house, was perfectly sincere. Beyond the lichen-grown stone parapet, upon which he dropped his elbows, stretched long expanses and vistas of the smoothest turf, bordered by old-fashioned clipped yews ; advanced as the season was, the beds were still gay with begonias, asters, zinnias and dahlias ; arches covered with climbing roses displayed plenty of late blooms, and in the far distance, through an opening in the trees, could be discerned the faint blue cloud of smoke which hung over Wilverton.

'Upon my word,' he exclaimed, 'I don't think you have much to complain of!'

'It *is* pretty, isn't it?' said Mrs Frere, in a tone of quiet satisfaction. 'Nothing can quite spoil the dear old place, though there are a hundred and fifty things which want doing to it, and which perhaps you don't notice, seeing it for the first time. Didn't I hear you accuse me of complaining just now? That was rather hard upon me ; because, in spite of everything, I don't think I am very much given that

way. Of course, one does feel the difference between present times and old times ; but, as I always tell George, "What can't be cured must be endured," and it is worse for the young people than it is for us.'

In her leisurely, unceasing way, she continued to dilate upon the discomforts of a falling income while she conducted her hearer through the conservatories and stovehouses, which seemed to be tolerably well furnished, notwithstanding hard times. Harry, who, in the natural course of things, would have held a commission in the Guards until he married, was compelled to go off on foreign service in a line regiment, and must not dream of marrying, unless, perchance, he should fall in with some wandering heiress ; what was to become of Dick Mrs Frere could not imagine ; but he would certainly have to earn his own living some day, and in the meantime, there would be the heavy cost of his school and college education to defray. 'Besides which, one must expect him to run up a few bills, poor boy, like other people.'

She talked about her domestic affairs as frankly and naturally as a child talks about its toys, and with an equal confidence that what interested her would interest her companion.

'Well, then there is Anne, you know,' she went on. 'Anne is very good about it and says she doesn't care ; but one really feels that it is rather too bad to deny her the amusements and opportunities that other girls have. Of course, she has been presented and has gone through a scrap of a season ; but there, unfortunately, it has had to end. My married daughter, Lady Arvagh, would be willing to take her out ; only they themselves

have no London house, and as poor Lord Arvagh is an Irish landlord and Kate is a good deal occupied, what with having continual babies and one thing and another, they aren't much use. Well, one can but hope that somebody may eventually turn up. People do sometimes turn up in the country, and, now that I come to think of it, it was at a country house that I first met George.'

Matthew was upon the point of inquiring whether there was no young man in the neighbourhood whom Miss Anne might possibly be induced to regard with favour, when he was preserved from putting what, as he subsequently reflected, would have been an indiscreet question, by the advent of Mr Frere, who came bustling out of the house to say,—

'My dear, Mrs Jennings has called, and they have let her in. I can't face the woman alone; but I must see her, or she'll think I'm frightened of her. Come along, and let us get the interview over. What idiots these servants are! Not but what they do it on purpose, I believe!'

'Oh, it can't be helped,' Mrs Frere responded tranquilly. 'Mrs Jennings is a sensible sort of woman, and if I tell her that we found it necessary to make a change, she will understand. After all, she must know what a stupid old thing her husband is.'

'And in case she shouldn't, you will tell her, I suppose? Oh, you are capable of it, my dear; I have heard you say worse things than that before now. And then you can't make out why people are so ready to take offence!'

'Now, George, was it you or I who vowed that Dr Jennings should never write another prescription under your roof?'

The couple moved away towards the house, wrangling amicably as they went, and entirely oblivious of the circumstance that they had left Dr Jennings's supplanter to take care of himself. It was their habit to dispute together in this way, each deeming the other to be nothing but a grown-up child, and neither being very far wrong in that estimate; but their mutual affection had increased rather than diminished during some thirty years of married life, and if Mrs Frere believed in her heart that 'George' could do no wrong, it is certain that her wishes had far more weight with the testy old gentleman than those of all the rest of the family put together. Perhaps that was one reason why scarcely as much had been done for the rest of the family as might have been done.

Matthew gazed after them, laughing softly, and mentally thanking his stars that he had not been invited to take part in the forthcoming encounter with Mrs Jennings, an ill-tempered, gossiping old woman, with whom he had hitherto only managed to maintain relations of amity by dint of sedulously keeping out of her way. 'She will assuredly hate me now,' he mused, 'for these are the first patients whom I have actually filched from her husband. I don't suppose she can do me very much harm, though.'

He did not in the least mind being left to his own devices, and soon became so absorbed in the scrutiny of sundry carefully-shielded shrubs which were seldom to be met with in that part of England that he did not hear a light footfall upon the grass behind him. He turned round, with a start, when Anne's voice said, close to his ear,—

‘I came out to apologise for my unceremonious parents. I fled upstairs as soon as I was told that Mrs Jennings was in the drawing-room, and from an upper window I saw them coolly turn their backs upon you. If you want to go away, please don’t think it your duty to wait and say good-bye to them. I will make your excuses.’

Most men, on being thus addressed, would have felt bound to say, or hint, that Mr and Mrs Frere had been admirably replaced; but Matthew Austin thought it quite enough to reply simply and honestly,—

‘Oh, I’m in no hurry, thanks; I could amuse myself for hours in a garden like this. I wonder how your gardener manages to grow such fine *escallonias* out in the open; surely that is very unusual in these parts, isn’t it?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you,’ Miss Frere answered. ‘I am very fond of flowers, but I know hardly anything about them, and still less about trees and shrubs. You are a learned botanist, aren’t you?’

‘No, only a learner. Gardening is one of the hobbies that one takes up as one gets on in life, and when other things fail. At your age one naturally prefers the other things.’

‘What other things?’ the girl inquired.

‘Your mother says you are very unselfish about it; still it *is* hard lines—of course it must be. Personally, I have never seen anything of fashionable life, nor ever wished for it; but I can quite understand that to be cut off from that sort of thing may be as great a deprivation to some people as it would be to me to be deprived of—well, of flowers or tobacco.’

‘I shouldn’t have thought that I looked very much like one of those people. Anyhow, I am not one of them. If I had no worse trouble than being obliged to stay at home from year’s end to year’s end, I should have little enough to complain of!’

Unconventional though he was apt to be, Matthew did not like to ask her point-blank what her troubles were; but after they had strolled silently across the sward for a few yards, he remarked,—

‘There is a sovereign remedy for every trouble under the sun.’

‘And that is?’

‘To forget it. Of course I don’t dare to offer this as a prescription; my patients would set me down as a most unfeeling brute if I were to do that. But sometimes I manage to force it upon them without their knowledge, and often Nature forces it upon them. If it were not so, the average duration of life would be shortened to an extent which would quite bewilder the compilers of statistics.’

‘Ah, you are talking of troubles that can’t be mended. I daresay it is possible to forget for a few hours that one has a mortal disease, and the loss of someone whom one has loved is evidently a sorrow which can be forgotten in time. But while there is life there is hope, and while there is hope there is sure to be unhappiness. You may induce your patients to forget that they are dying, but you don’t very often induce their husbands or wives to forget it, do you?’

‘Not very often, perhaps; still, the thing is to be done. It

is a question of having plenty of necessary work to do. The poor are better off than the rich in that respect.' He added, after a pause, 'I should think you would be fairly well provided with occupations.'

'Oh, yes; I do all the housekeeping now, and, during the holidays, there is Maggie to be looked after; besides which, I have the usual routine of parish visiting, and so on. All that doesn't prevent—' But here she checked herself and laughed. 'One would think that I was seriously consulting you!' she exclaimed. 'I only wanted to point out that your remedy won't suit every case; I didn't mean to imply that I myself was suffering from some dire affliction.'

'Nevertheless, that was what you did imply,' Matthew observed, smiling.

'Did I really? Well then, if you will promise not to tell anybody, I will confess what is the matter. I can't afford to employ a London dressmaker; I can't get a Wilverton dressmaker to fit me, and not for one moment can I forget that I carry about with me creases and wrinkles where there ought to be none. Good gracious! here comes that dreadful old Mrs Jennings. Heaven be praised! she is short-sighted and she hasn't seen me yet. I must fly before she does. Good-bye.'

Thereupon Miss Frere promptly vanished behind one of the tall yew hedges, leaving Matthew with a slight sense of having been unjustly snubbed. Surely the girl might have understood that he had not been intentionally impertinent!

However, he had to postpone further reflections upon that subject; for now Mrs Frere joined him, accompanied by her

unwelcome visitor, of whom she was obviously longing to get rid, and—

‘Oh, Mr Austin,’ said she, ‘Mrs Jennings very kindly offers to give you a lift home. I heard that you had sent your dog-cart away, and I am sure you will be glad to be saved that long walk.’

‘Not at all, I assure you! I enjoy a walk,’ Matthew was beginning eagerly; but Mrs Frere made a grimace of such piteous entreaty at him that he perceived what was required of him and ended his sentence with a murmur of thanks to the other lady, adding that they ought to start at once, as the evening dews were now so heavy.

Shortly afterwards he was being driven swiftly across the park in the smart victoria which was a symbol of Dr Jennings’s lucrative practice, while the whispered speech with which Mrs Frere had taken leave of him still rang in his ears.

‘So good of you to take her away! And it’s just as well that you should be seen with her, you know—shows there is no ill-feeling.’

There was plenty of ill-feeling on the part of Mrs Jennings, a stout, elderly woman, with a face and figure much resembling those which frequently adorn the bows of coasting brigs; but she endeavoured to conceal it, and, instead of vilifying the Freres, spoke warmly, if a trifle patronisingly, in their praise.

‘Such thoroughly good, worthy people! I am really very fond of Mrs Frere and always make a point of going to see her as often as I can. But of course I have so many visits to pay! However, as I was saying to her just now, I am determined not to let her drop.’

Mrs Jennings had said no such thing, and would never have been so foolish as to say it. In the neighbourhood of watering-places like Wilverton, 'county people' stand in much the same relation to town residents as royal personages do to the dwellers in Mayfair and Belgravia; so that, although spiteful things may be said of them behind their backs, it would be a sad mistake to be guilty of an impertinence to their faces. The backs of the Frere family being now safely turned to Mrs Jennings, she proceeded to descant compassionately upon their fallen grandeur.

'I should be very sorry to lose them; still, I can't help feeling that it would be almost better if they were to let the place and go away. You see, it isn't only the mortification of having to live as they do now, but there is that shocking scandal about the eldest son, which they must be perpetually reminded of while they remain at home.'

Matthew being resolved to die rather than make any inquiry as to the alleged scandal, she was obliged to tell him what it was, without having been asked. Spencer Frere, it seemed, had done something quite awful. It might have been forgery, or it might have been embezzlement—Mrs Jennings could not say for certain—but, at any rate, he had cost his father immense sums of money, and at last the old man, in a violent fit of passion, had turned him adrift.

'What has become of him nobody knows. He may be in the workhouse, and I should think very likely he is. Isn't it dreadful?'

'If he had been guilty of forgery or embezzlement he would be in prison, would he not?' Matthew asked.

‘Well, if he had been *proved* guilty, I suppose he would ; but no doubt such things can be hushed up. Of course, one makes every allowance for the poor old man ; still, I can’t help rejoicing for my husband’s sake—though I am sorry for yours—that he has chosen you as his future medical adviser. Often and often Dr Jennings has come home and said to me, “Really, Jane, I don’t think I ought to put up any longer with Mr Frere’s insulting language ;” but I have always begged him to go on and take no notice. Who wouldn’t be soured by such experiences ! Not that I should like the feeling of having turned a son of mine away to starve, whatever his offence might have been ; but, as I say, one *must* make allowances. I do trust that poor Anne may yet marry well, and they have certainly done their very best for her ; only, she has such an unfortunate manner that it all seems to be no use.’

Mrs Jennings had some equally amiable things to say about each remaining member of the family, but she spoke to a somewhat inattentive auditor. There are certain things which certain people are always sure to say, and Matthew, the physiologist, having already formed a diagnosis of his companion’s nature, was not much affected, one way or the other, by symptoms which only pointed to the existence of a mental condition neither novel nor interesting.

CHAPTER IV

AT WILVERTON HORSE SHOW

IT so happened that, for three or four weeks in succession, Matthew Austin saw nothing more of the Freres. He did, it is true, during that interval, receive several friendly notes from Hayes Park, one of which contained a request from Mrs Frere that she might be allowed to see his flowers; but he was unable to be at home on the afternoon that she named, and Bush was deputed to do the honours in his absence. This was a task willingly undertaken by Mr Bush, who obtained the consequent gratuity that he had anticipated and who took an early opportunity of telling his master what a nice lady Mrs Frere was.

‘What I call one o’ the hold sort, sir, and very glad I am as you should have a few patients among the real gentry. ‘Ard work I don’t say nothin’ against, and I can do as ‘ard a day’s work myself as here and there a one, though I say it. But the labourer is worthy of his ‘ire, whether ‘tis a pore thirty shillin’ a week or more like thirty pound—same as that there old Jennings makes during the winter time, they tell me—and ‘twon’t do you no manner of ‘arm to be known as Mr Frere’s medical man, sir, you may depend.’

‘Well, I hope it won’t,’ answered Matthew. ‘Did Mrs Frere come alone?’

‘She did, sir, and stop a long time, haskin’ about this and that. Not that I begrudged it to her; for ’tis reelly a pleasure to talk to a lady as knows enough to set a proper value upon good gardenin’.’

Well, there was no occasion to feel disappointed because Miss Frere had not seen fit to accompany her mother; nor, in truth, was Matthew’s disappointment more that momentary. He had other matters to occupy his thoughts than the study of a young woman who was something of a mystery to him, and an outbreak of low fever in the overcrowded slums of the town had latterly furnished him with as much as he could manage of that hard work upon which his gardener had bestowed a conditional approval. Nevertheless, it was not without some half-acknowledged hope of encountering Anne that he betook himself, one afternoon, to the Wilverton Autumn Horse Show, where, as he had learnt from the hand-bills, George Frere Esq. D.L. and J.P. was to act as one of the judges. He had, to be sure, a more plausible excuse, inasmuch as he thought it might be necessary for him to purchase a second horse, and it was just as well to see what class of animal was likely to come into the market.

He saw various classes of animals unsuited to his purpose; he also saw a vast concourse of people, witnessed a pretty display of jumping and recognised, in the ring beneath him, the broad back and the leather leggings of Mr Frere; but he did not recognise anybody else, and he was already thinking about going home when he was accosted by a tall, fair-

haired lady in a mackintosh (for the weather was showery and chilly), who said,—

‘Please don’t cut me, Mr Austin. If it is too much trouble to come and see us when you are asked, you might at least be equal to the effort of taking off your hat after you have been persistently bowed to at intervals for the last ten minutes.’

‘I beg your pardon most humbly,’ answered Matthew, with his hat in his hand; ‘I suppose it was because I was looking out for you so anxiously that I looked everywhere except in the right direction. It hasn’t been any fault of mine, I can assure you, that I have been obliged to decline your mother’s kind invitations. I have had my hands full ever since the day when I lunched with you, and this is the very first holiday I have allowed myself. Indeed, I am here more or less on business, for I rather want to buy another horse. Do you, by any chance, know a sound horse when you see one?—because I don’t.’

Miss Frere shook her head.

‘I am afraid I can’t be of much assistance to you; still, I am acquainted with a good many of the horses here by reputation. Shall I walk round with you and point out the notoriously unsound ones?’

Matthew at once closed with this obliging offer, wondering a little why it had been made; but upon that point Miss Frere hastened to enlighten him, in a manner more truthful than flattering.

‘It was one word for you and two for myself,’ she interrupted his expressions of gratitude by saying. ‘I drove

over with my father, who has left me to be taken care of by a number of horsey ladies. Hereabouts, everybody becomes overpoweringly horsey in the autumn, and as I am not, I can't talk to them, nor they to me. I will tell Maggie that you have been too busy to remember where Hayes Park is; but I am not sure that she will accept the excuse. At present she sets you down as a fair-weather—or rather a foul-weather—friend, and she talks of falling ill again, since that seems to be the only means of attracting you.'

'I am glad to be spoken of as a friend of any description,' Matthew declared. 'You didn't treat me very much like a friend the last time that I saw you.'

To this leading remark Miss Frere made no immediate reply. They had reached the sheds beneath which some of the horses were standing, and she was able to give him certain information respecting a few of them, which rendered negotiations with their owners superfluous. Moreover, while thus employed, she was accosted by various gentlemen of various ages, who evidently represented the squirearchy of the neighbourhood, and to whom, as it seemed to Matthew, she was barely civil. But when they moved once more towards the ring, where a competition was just then going on, she reverted abruptly to the previous subject.

'I am sorry if I was rude,' said she; 'I didn't mean to be; but I can't help it when I am shy, and I almost always do feel shy.'

Anybody else would have protested that Miss Frere showed no symptoms of suffering from that foolish malady; but Matthew only remarked considering,—

‘Yes, I suppose so ; yours would be the sort of temperament that is permanently and constitutionally shy. Was it shyness that made you snub all those men who spoke to you just now, for do you dislike them?’

‘I didn’t know I had snubbed them. I don’t dislike them in the least ; but I have nothing to say to them, and I know they only speak to me out of politeness. You, and one or two others, are quite different ; when you talk to people you make them feel as if you were really rather interested in them ; and then you never attempt to suit your conversation to your company—which is an immense encouragement.’

‘An encouragement to whom or to what?’ Matthew inquired.

‘Oh, I was only trying to explain. But, after all, one can’t very well explain, and it doesn’t signify. Please don’t imagine again that I intend to be rude to you, though.’

‘All I imagined was that I had been rather rude—or, at all events, inquisitive—and that you thought it advisable to give me a gentle hint to that effect. I wasn’t much mistaken, was I?’

There is a time and a place for everything, and the place to put embarrassing questions is assuredly not the narrow entrance to a ring, while a passage is being with difficulty forced through the crowd for a string of high-spirited hunters. Miss Frere, meditating upon her companion’s query and the terms in which she should answer it, did not use her eyes as she ought to have done, and was consequently within an inch or two of being then and there put to eternal silence. Matthew was only just in time to throw his arms round her and pull her violently back. She saw the flash of the iron shoe that whizzed close past her

head ; she heard that curious gasping groan from the bystanders which is always heard when a horse lashes out in a crowd ; she was conscious of a general and precipitate movement of retreat which nearly swept her off her feet ; but she was not frightened, and as soon as Matthew had relaxed his grasp of her she merely observed, smiling,—

‘That was a rather near thing, wasn’t it?’

Matthew, for his part, had turned white to the lips.

‘It was indeed!’ he exclaimed. And then: ‘What nerve you have!’

‘Well, the danger was over before I knew anything about it, you see. There wasn’t time to indulge in hysterics.’

‘Oh, of course not ; but what I mean is, that you are as calm and cool as possible now ; most women would have been shaking all over. Because I presume you realise that, if that brute had caught you on the head, you would never have moved again.’

‘Yes ; and I don’t exactly want to die,’ answered the girl musingly. ‘Though I often think that I don’t particularly care about living either. It doesn’t seem as if there was much use in it.’

‘Oh, this won’t do at all!’ said Matthew. ‘You are altogether out of sorts, or you wouldn’t talk such nonsense. Now, look here, Miss Frere ; you have virtually told me already that something is the matter ; will you be kind enough to treat me as a physician and tell me what it is? You will understand that I don’t ask out of mere curiosity. I think I can see that you want to tell somebody, and I think it is more than likely that you will feel the better for having done so.’

The girl smiled.

‘Well, you are quite right; I did want to tell you,’ she answered. ‘It is no secret either, for I am sure you cannot have driven all the way into Wilverton with Mrs Jennings and remained in ignorance of it. Not that she knows everything.’

It soon appeared that Mrs Jennings, so far from knowing everything, had been quite mistaken as to her main facts. Spencer Frere had been guilty of no offence so heinous or so unpardonable as that of forgery; but, on the other hand, there was little likelihood, his sister feared, that he would ever be pardoned. What he had done had been to incur heavy debts, the defrayal of which had seriously crippled his father’s resources; and, in addition to that, he had behaved rather badly to various friends of his, from whom he had at different times borrowed large sums of money. It was this latter delinquency which had brought about a final breach between him and his choleric parent. He had not confessed to it; the truth had only leaked out by degrees; there had been great difficulty in ascertaining the actual amount of his obligations and still greater difficulty in inducing his creditors to accept their due. Moreover, Spencer, when upbraided for his dishonourable conduct, had neither expressed nor, apparently, felt the slightest remorse. He had made light of the whole matter, declaring that other fellows had only done for him what he would have done for them, had their positions been reversed.

‘And so,’ concluded Anne, ‘it ended, as I always foresaw that it would end, in his being turned adrift and told never to show his face at Hayes Park again. It sounds cruel; but with-

out knowing Spencer you can hardly understand what provocation my father had. I don't think it was saying too much to say that he had disgraced himself and disgraced us all.'

'Still, some door of repentance may have been left open for him; and I suppose he wasn't sent out to fight his way through the world absolutely penniless?'

'No; not absolutely. But Spencer is one of those people who literally can't help spending any money that they may have in their pockets, and as for doors of repentance—well, I don't know; but I am afraid that he will never try very hard to squeeze through a narrow door so long as he can keep body and soul together in liberty outside.'

'And what has become of him?'

Anne glanced at her interlocutor and hesitated.

'I ought to have mentioned,' said she, 'that we were all strictly forbidden to hold any communication with him.'

Matthew drew his own conclusions, but was discreet enough to refrain from giving utterance to them. He merely remarked,—

'I see now what you meant by incurable troubles, and I must admit that my panacea does not apply quite as well to this one as to most. I suppose you are very fond of your brother?'

'Yes; he is the one nearest to me in age, and we were always together as children. Besides, he isn't really as bad as they think. It was always his way to make himself out worse than he really was—I don't know why.'

'Well,' said Matthew, 'I see no reason in the world why everything shouldn't come right with time and patience. From what you tell me, I should say that your brother stood somewhat

in need of a sharp lesson, and I doubt whether your father is anything like as stern and inexorable as mine was.'

He narrated the story of his own family quarrel, to which Anne listened with a melancholy smile.

'The only difference between the two cases,' she remarked, 'is that you are you and that Spencer is Spencer. Of course there is the further detail of your having been in the right, while Spencer was in the wrong; but that doesn't affect the question of pardon much. It isn't that my father is inexorable, but that he can't afford to be ruined, and he is justified in saying that he can't trust Spencer. If a reconciliation could be arranged to-morrow, it would be the same old story over again. That is why I have only just enough of hope left to make me thoroughly miserable.'

'Would you be less miserable if you had none?'

'Perhaps. My mother, I am sure, has none, and she is resigned. As you were saying the other day, a time comes when one ceases to mourn for one's dead.'

'Don't be bitter about it,' said Matthew, answering her thought rather than her words. 'You have one kind of temperament, your mother has another and your father has a third. We are what we are—all of us—and we didn't make ourselves.'

'I am not bitter,' the girl declared; 'I don't blame them. Only, it is rather hard never to be allowed even to mention Spencer's name to anybody.'

'You can mention him to me as often as you like. I haven't much comfort to offer you, beyond the customary

commonplaces, but I know what a relief it is to be able to talk about one's troubles and anxieties.'

It might have struck him as somewhat strange that she should select a comparative stranger for her confidant, had he been less habituated to receiving confidences; but from the days of his boyhood people had let him into their secrets, knowing instinctively that he was both safe and sympathetic.

'What do you mean by the customary commonplaces?' Anne asked. 'Do you mean that there is nothing to be done but to trust to time and the chapter of accidents?'

'Is there anything else to be done? You haven't told me where your brother is, or what he is doing.'

She looked down, drilling holes in the moist earth with the point of her umbrella. Perhaps she would have given him the information that he required if their interview had been protracted for a few more minutes; but before she could make up her mind to speak, Mr Frere bustled up, saying,—

'Now, Anne, if you're ready, we may as well be off. They tell me I sha'n't be wanted after this, and I don't want to get a chill driving home, and be laid up for six weeks. Well, Austin, what have you been doing with yourself all this long time? I can't say I've been anxious to see you professionally—though I expect I shall have to say so before I'm much older—but you might have looked us up in a non-professional way. I hope my daughter has been scolding you.'

He hurried away, without waiting for a reply, and took his daughter with him, while Matthew bent his steps homewards, forgetful of the harness-horses that he had intended to inspect.

Matthew, as has already been mentioned, was not susceptible, nor did it occur to him to draw inferences which many a man would have drawn from the compliment just paid to him by Miss Frere. Nevertheless, it is probable that he was at that moment not very far from falling in love for the first time in his active, dreamy, speculative life, and the probability is not lessened by the circumstance that all he said to himself was,—

‘I must try and find time to see that girl again soon. She has got into a morbid condition which paves the way for all manner of diseases.’

CHAPTER V

A FRESH PATIENT

THE often noticed, and often resented unwillingness of doctors to multiply visits after the condition of a patient has been pronounced hopeless is probably not due to that lack of humanity which is apt to be laid to their charge. Their mission is to heal ; and from the moment that they know it to be out of their power to fulfil that mission they not unnaturally shrink from wasting their own time and other people's money—perhaps also lose interest in a case which, so far as they are medically concerned, has already taken its place amongst bygone experiences. It may have been some quasi-professional feeling of this sort that rendered Matthew Austin, than whom a kinder-hearted man never breathed, a little reluctant to seek occasion for a second private interview with Miss Frere. He now knew why she looked so sad, and, although he was sincerely sorry for her, he did not see what he could possibly do to help her. This brother (with whom it was easy to guess that she was keeping up a clandestine correspondence) was evidently a scapegrace. He might, under the chastening influence of adversity, reform, and at some future date his

father might possibly be interceded with ; but, for the present, as she herself seemed to be fully aware, the only service that could be rendered to him was to supply him with money, which he would doubtless hasten to expend in a manner not to his own advantage.

As regards Anne herself, it is quite true that, while she had been talking to him at the horse show, and while he had been admiring her courage and her straightforward simplicity, as well as her personal beauty, Matthew had not been very far removed from falling in love with her ; but, since Matthew was very far removed indeed from suspecting a fact which only dawned upon him at a much later period of his life, he did not at the time experience anything of a lover's eagerness to see her again. Added to which, he had his work to attend to.

Nevertheless, he conscientiously devoted his first free afternoon to driving over to Hayes Park, in order to pay his respects, and shortly after he had been admitted into Mrs Frere's presence there came a sound of rushing footsteps outside, followed by the tempestuous entrance of Maggie, who hastened to state breathlessly that she had finished her lessons.

'My dear child,' remonstrated Mrs Frere, 'are you quite sure that Fräulein Backfisch gave you leave to come down ? It seems very early for you to have done your day's work.'

Some light was thrown upon the customary standard of discipline maintained in the Frere household by Maggie's reply.

'Oh ! yes, I think she did ; but it does take her such a long time to say anything, and I told her I *must* go, because the

medicine-man had come at last. We always call you the medicine-man now,' Maggie continued explanatorily, addressing herself to Matthew, of whose hand she had taken possession. 'It sounds rather a nasty sort of name; but Anne says it has nothing to do with powders or black draughts.'

'Everybody knows that the greatest compliment you can pay a man is to give him a nickname,' Matthew said. 'I rather like mine, and I hope it may help you to bear in mind that I have something to do besides visiting young ladies who don't require medicine. Your sister told me I was in your black books because I hadn't been to see you since your recovery.'

'It wasn't me more than mamma and Anne,' Maggie returned. 'You lunched here ever so long ago, and people who have been to luncheon or dinner ought always to call afterwards. Mamma said so, and she wondered why you hadn't done it.'

Mrs Frere was not much disconcerted. She merely remarked,—

'Maggie has been an *enfant terrible* from her cradle. One would think that at the age of fourteen she ought to be growing out of it; but, after all, one likes to keep them young as long as one can. I will forgive you for not having called, Mr Austin, if you will forgive me for having said that you were neglecting your duties. Now I'm going to ring for tea.'

But it was intimated to Matthew that before he had his tea he really must come round to the stable-yard and inspect a litter of retriever puppies which Maggie was eager to

exhibit to him, and he was the more willing to comply with this request because he had noticed that Mrs Frere had been busily engaged in writing letters when he was announced.

If it be a compliment to a man to have a nickname conferred upon him, it is a still greater compliment to be admitted into the unreserved confidence of his juniors. Maggie had many things to say to her friend, some of which were extremely amusing to him, though perhaps they might not be found equally so by the general reader. The puppies were duly admired, the sadly empty stables were explored, a visit was paid to the pigs, and it was under consideration whether there would not be just time to go and see the cows milked when Miss Frere suddenly appeared upon the scene to put a summary veto upon any such project. Miss Frere, it seemed, was the emissary of Fräulein Backfisch, who had been justly incensed by her pupil's unceremonious flight, and who would have come out to claim her in person, had she not been afraid of catching cold.

Maggie had inherited her share of the family good nature and philosophy. She only sighed heavily and said,—

‘Horrid old beast! All right, then; I’ll go in. But you must come again soon; and please come on a Saturday, if you can, because Saturdays are half holidays. I can always get rid of Backfisch by telling her that I want to go out for a walk. She hates fresh air, and her corns hurt her when she has to put on thick boots.’

Nobody, except those rare persons who recollect what they themselves were in their early years, can tell how much

of ignorance and how much of mischievous intent goes to constitute an *enfant terrible*. It was with an air of perfect innocence that Maggie, lingering for a moment over her adieux, added,—

‘Do you know, I have been thinking how nice it would be if you were to marry Anne. I wish you would! She likes you awfully, and she doesn’t generally like men. Do think of it!’

‘I will give the subject serious consideration,’ answered Matthew composedly (though he could not help reddening a little). ‘Meanwhile, I should advise you to be off as quickly as you can and bestow serious consideration upon your own business. If I were Fräulein Backfisch, you would have a bad five minutes to look forward to, I can tell you.’

Now, there was really nothing in this piece of childish impertinence that ought to have caused annoyance to two sensible persons; but Anne had evidently been vexed either by it or by something in the tone of Matthew’s rejoinder; for as soon as Maggie had vanished, she said, rather stiffly and distantly,—

‘You will find tea ready in the drawing-room, I believe. I must say good-bye, as I have to get down to the village and back before dark.’

‘You will hardly manage that,’ Matthew observed. ‘We are going to have rain, too, presently. Is it absolutely necessary for you to go to the village this afternoon?’

‘It isn’t absolutely necessary,’ answered the girl; ‘but I want a walk and I don’t mind rain. I won’t keep you standing any longer out here in the cold, though.’

The air was in truth raw, with that moist, penetrating chill which accompanies the gales and rains of early winter; low, ragged clouds were being driven across the grey sky from the south-eastward by a wind which was rising in gusts and hurrying the fallen leaves before it, and there was a forlorn look about the tall figure which was half turned away from him that moved Matthew with a sudden feeling of intense compassion. She seemed to be so utterly alone.

‘It is you who choose to be left out in the cold,’ he said. ‘Why should you choose what no human being likes? I was in hopes that, if I saw you to-day, you would go on with what you were telling me the last time we met.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ answered Anne, in a constrained voice, ‘but I think I told you all there was to tell—all I had a right to tell, anyhow. Afterwards I was rather sorry that I had said so much. Only I was sure you must have heard a garbled version of the story from Mrs Jennings. Please don’t look so sorrowful about it; there is a skeleton in almost every family, I suppose.’

It was plain that she was under the influence of one of those shy moods to which she had made allusion and that sympathy would not be welcomed by her at that especial moment. Matthew, understanding this, wisely allowed her to go her way without much further parley, and returned to Mrs Frere, whom he found cosily established between the tea-table and the fire. It was but a word here and there of Mrs Frere’s cheerful prattle that reached his intelligence, while, as usual, only a very few of his occasional absent-minded

remarks reached her hearing. This, however, did not prevent them from spending a pleasant half-hour together nor from enjoying one another's society.

'It's a queer thing,' thought Matthew to himself, as he climbed into his dog-cart and gave the reins a shake, 'that the faculty of speech should help us so little towards mutual comprehension. I couldn't, for the life of me, say what that dear old lady has been talking about all this time ; but I know just exactly what she is and how she feels. There can't be any doubt that she takes a far saner and more reasonable view of existence than her daughter does, and that makes one like her—though her daughter is probably worth a hundred of her.'

Without any consciousness of being so, he was a trifle irritated with Anne. He had already forgotten Maggie's indiscretion and, even if he had remembered it, would not have ascribed the elder sister's change of manner to that cause. The waywardness of women, towards which he was, as a rule, lenient enough, knowing their physical constitution and the inevitable influences of the body upon the mind, did not in this instance represent itself to him as an excuse ; and perhaps the circumstance that it did not might have warned him that he had ceased to regard Anne Frere as a woman like other women. But he was much more given to the study of his fellow-beings than to self-scrutiny, so that he reached home in what, for him, was almost a bad humour.

There was a note lying on his study table—a note which, had he but known it as he carelessly tore the flap of the envelope with his fore-finger, was to prove the first word of a

new and important chapter in his life. It certainly bore no outward indication of being so portentous a document, for it merely stated, in the third person, that Lady Sara Murray was anxious to consult Mr Austin and would be obliged if he would kindly call upon her at the Royal Hotel as soon as he could spare time. He shrugged his shoulders and made a grimace, glancing at the gold monogram and the thick paper, which exhaled a faint perfume of that detestable scent known as 'white rose'—probably so called because, among all the white roses that bloom, not one smells in the very least like it.

'Some fashionable lady who is suffering from late hours and over-nourishment and want of exercise,' he muttered. 'More in Jennings's line than mine, I suspect. Well, I had better go round and see her, since she has been pleased to send for me; most likely one visit will suffice.'

But Lady Sara Murray was by no means the sort of person that he had hastily taken her for: that much he discovered very soon after he had walked to the Royal Hotel and had been ushered into the stuffy little gas-lighted sitting-room occupied by her ladyship. Fashionable she might be, and doubtless was; but she was genuinely ill. In fact, she had such a complication of maladies that she established an immediate claim upon his regard with which her personality had nothing whatsoever to do.

Her personality, however, was not unpleasing. She was a woman of between forty and fifty—nearer fifty than forty, perhaps—and, notwithstanding her ruined complexion and sunken cheeks, it was easy to see that she had been handsome once upon a time. Her hair, like her complexion, had faded; it was now

of an indeterminate hue and was turning grey at the temples ; but her small, slightly aquiline nose and her soft, dark-brown eyes had lost little of their beauty, while her mouth, though somewhat spoilt in shape by lines of age and suffering, could still smile very pleasantly. As a matter of fact, Lady Sara had driven not a few members of the opposite sex to the verge of temporary despair in days long past and forgotten.

Matthew was not long in discovering that this poor lady would never be anything but an invalid ; for rheumatic gout had her in its grip, and although the Wilverton waters might, and probably would, do something for her, the enemy was too firmly established to be permanently dislodged. As for the asthma and the bronchial troubles with which she was likewise afflicted, treatment had a chance of success there, and she seemed to have such a wretched constitution that to set her on her legs again, even for a few years, would be quite a triumph. So interesting, indeed, was she as a patient that the young doctor had been examining and questioning her for a good half hour before he heeded or replied to certain items of information which she had bestowed upon him parenthetically.

‘You were saying that you know my brother,’ he remarked at length, after jotting down some notes in his pocket-book. ‘I scarcely ever see Godfrey ; but I am always glad to hear of him, and I’m sure it was very good of him to mention my name to you.’

Lady Sara laughed : she had a low, musical laugh, and a gently modulated voice, he noticed.

‘That means that you are grateful to him for having sent you such a wreck to patch up,’ she observed. ‘Sir Godfrey warned me

that you were a social recluse and that you didn't care to make fresh acquaintances, unless they had something terrible the matter with them. I hope you think I have enough the matter with me !'

'You will have to take very great care of yourself and do just what I tell you,' answered Matthew seriously. 'I hope that, if you will consent to do that, you will be feeling much better soon, and in a few weeks' time you may begin to take the waters. But for the present, you see, it is most important—'

'Oh, yes, I know,' she interrupted a little impatiently. 'Of course I shall obey your orders, and you can't realise half as keenly as I do how important it is that I should live a little longer. When once my daughter is married, and settled in a home of her own, I daresay I shall begin to disregard physicians—whose orders, to tell you the truth, haven't helped me much hitherto. Now, if you are not in a great hurry, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me who lives here and what amusements there are for a girl of not quite eighteen. I suppose it is a desperately dull place?'

Matthew was bound to admit that Wilverton was neither Cannes nor Homburg.

'Still,' he said, 'there is a certain amount of gaiety during the winter season, I believe—balls at the Assembly Rooms and dances at private houses and so on.'

'Oh, I don't mean balls and dances,' Lady Sara told him. 'Lilian is not out yet, and I don't wish her to make a provincial *début*. But if there were a few nice people in the neighbour-

hood, a few girls of her own age, whom she could associate with, that would be something.'

Matthew at once thought of the Freres, and was about to mention their name, when he was momentarily struck dumb by the entrance of the most beautiful human being whom he had ever beheld in his life. That was his impression of Lilian Murray at the time, and he still maintains its accuracy. Possibly she may not be quite as beautiful now as she was then, although many people would doubtless declare her to be more so; it is a question of individual taste. There is a kind of beauty which belongs only to girlhood—or rather childhood—and that, of course, is necessarily transient.

But the beauty which has form, feature and colouring for its constituent elements, Lilian possessed, and possesses, almost in perfection. Very few women have ever been blessed with a complexion like hers—a complexion comparable only to the petals of a dog-rose; not many can boast of a figure in which the most exacting sculptor would find it hard to point out a defect; not above many shoulders is the head of the Capitoline Venus delicately poised, nor is wavy hair of that golden-copper tinge often seen. Red-brown eyes are not usually admired, but Lilian's, which were of that shade, harmonised with her hair and were so softened by long, curved lashes that no one could have wished to improve upon their colour.

For the rest, she did not appear to be conscious of her loveliness or to exult over the silent, unmistakable homage rendered thereto by an amazed country doctor. She was evidently rather shy, and took little part in the conversation

which was resumed after she had seated herself on a footstool beside her mother's sofa. But Matthew, who watched her during the ensuing five minutes, and saw how anxiously she was watching him, was not surprised that she summoned up courage to follow him out on to the landing, when he had taken his leave. He answered her quick questions as encouragingly as honesty would permit. Lady Sara would be almost sure to benefit by the baths, he said; he certainly thought that her present sufferings might be much alleviated; he had every reason to believe that, if she could be kept from catching cold, and if the tendency to bronchitis could be checked, her general health would improve.

'But that doesn't mean getting quite well,' the girl remarked, in a disappointed voice.

'It doesn't mean that, of course; doctors are not fond of promising more than they are sure of being able to perform. My business just now is to try and make your mother better; after we have advanced a few steps we may begin to look further forward.'

The girl did not seem to think this very satisfactory. She was silent for a moment, and then asked all of a sudden, with a mixture of temerity and timidity which he afterwards found to be characteristic of her,—

'Don't you hate being a doctor?'

'No, I like it,' he answered, laughing. 'Otherwise I shouldn't be one.'

'Yes, Sir Godfrey said it was your own choice and that he couldn't understand it. Nor can I; I should have thought it

was a horrid occupation. It isn't as if doctors ever did people any good. Mamma has had dozens; but she only gets worse and worse.'

The tears that had gathered in the girl's eyes and the appealing expression of her quivering lips atoned for her petulance.

'Oh, you must not be downhearted,' Matthew said; 'we medical men are not quite such a useless class as you think, and, though it does not become me to boast, I may tell you for your comfort that I have successfully treated much worse cases than Lady Sara's. Only you must not ask us to perform miracles.'

She surveyed him consideringly for a few seconds, and then smiled.

'Will you come again soon?' she asked.

'I will come the day after to-morrow, in any case,' he replied, 'and before that, if you send for me.'

Thereupon he withdrew; and if, in the course of his long, solitary evening, he thought more frequently of Lilian Murray than of Anne Frere, there was nothing surprising in that. To the appreciative and dispassionate bystander an exquisitely beautiful child must always be a more pleasing subject for retrospective study than a woman whose claims to good looks fall decidedly short of that lofty level and whose behaviour has been a little bit unreasonable into the bargain. Moreover, as was remarked at the beginning of this chapter, it is painful and discouraging to have to deal with people to whom no practical assistance can be given.

CHAPTER VI

ANNE PREFERS SOLITUDE

IT would be doing Matthew Austin a gross injustice to assert that he took more trouble about Lady Sara Murray than he would have taken about any other woman similarly afflicted because she happened to be the mother of an incomparably beautiful child ; but he certainly did take a great deal of trouble to render her more easy and comfortable, and the gratitude of the incomparably beautiful child was, to say the least of it, an agreeable reward for his pains. Not in his medical capacity alone did he make himself serviceable to these friendless and forlorn ladies. It was he who (having ascertained that expenditure was a matter which they had to consider) removed them, without any fuss or difficulty, from the costly discomfort of the Royal Hotel into quiet, sunny lodgings in Prospect Place ; it was he who undertook to provide them, at a very moderate outlay, with the trained nurse who was essential to the invalid's well-being, and his conservatories supplied them daily with the flowers that brightened their little drawing-room.

‘Lilian says you told her not to ask for miracles,’ Lady Sara remarked one day ; ‘but you seem to be one of those extraordinary people who give a great deal more than they have been asked for. If you go on as you have begun, I believe you will be

ordering me to take a long walk every morning before you have done with me. Isn't that a part of the regular course of water-drinkers?'

It was not a course which was likely to be ever prescribed for that poor, crippled water-drinker ; still, at the end of a week or ten days she had greatly improved both in health and spirits ; so that she felt able to indulge in such occasional mild jocularities.

Indeed, it was rather as a friend than as a professional adviser that Mr Austin was received in those modest apartments. Perhaps his visits were more frequent than was necessary ; assuredly he made no note of them in his carelessly-kept books. There was generally some excuse for looking in on his way home, after the labours of the day, and the excuse of refreshing himself by a chat with Lilian was one which he could allege both inwardly and openly without *arrière pensée*. He was fond of children, and Lilian, notwithstanding her seventeen or eighteen years, was nothing but a child. Her shyness—a mere childish shyness, which had no affinity with Anne Frere's constitutional reserve—speedily wore off ; she told Matthew quite frankly that she liked him, and his successful treatment of her mother, so far as it had gone, had inspired her with an implicit confidence in him upon which he could not find it in his heart to throw cold water. Often, while he sat gazing at her, returning haphazard replies to the quick questions with which it was her habit to ply him, he wondered what her future would be and felt a quasi-paternal jealousy of the man to whom she was destined to belong. Probably, he thought, she would

make a great match ; probably her mother had the intention and the ability to arrange such a match for her. But he did not know whether Lady Sara Murray was the daughter of a duke or of an impoverished Irish peer, and had never had the curiosity to inquire ; for human beings interested him simply and solely as human beings, and with regard to conventional degrees of rank he was a Radical of the Radicals—differing in that respect from certain eloquent and more prominent demagogues whom we all know of.

Still, without being either a demagogue or a tuft-hunter, one really ought to know who is who ; and Mr Frere, for one, was not destitute of the knowledge which all ladies and most gentlemen have at their fingers' ends.

'So poor Lady Sara Murray has come down here for the winter, I'm told,' said he, chancing upon Matthew in the County Club one frosty evening. 'And you've annexed her, eh? Very glad of it! One more unfortunate rescued from the clutches of that useless old Jennings. She's a deplorable wreck, they say. Dear me! how time does fly! It doesn't seem like more than a generation ago that I used to admire her from a respectful distance at Kingsbridge House—wouldn't deign to look at me, of course. That was in the old Lord Kingsbridge's time, before the crash came, you know.'

'I never heard of Lord Kingsbridge, and I didn't know there had been a crash,' Matthew said ; 'but I have been wondering whether I might beg Mrs Frere to call on Lady Sara. She and her daughter are rather lonely, I am afraid ; so that it would be a real act of kindness to take some notice of them.'

‘Oh, my wife will call with the greatest pleasure,’ Mr Frere answered. ‘At least, I should think she would; but you had better ask her yourself, because women have such queer prejudices. The fact is that poor old Lord Kingsbridge’s children were a baddish lot. The young man—not that he’s young any longer—played the very deuce, ruined the property and had to go through the Bankruptcy Court; and his brothers were no better than he was. Then there was Lady Laura Keane, Lady Sara’s sister, who bolted with a groom and was divorced—a nasty business! There’s nothing against Lady Sara, though, that I know of. Married Murray in the Diplomatic Service, and was left very poorly provided for when he died, I believe. She might have married anybody at one time, but waited too long, I suppose, as they often do. Well, now, look here, Austin; why not come home with me and take pot-luck? Then you can have a talk with Mrs Frere, who will be delighted to see you. You’re such a difficult fellow to get hold of nowadays that you’ll become priceless presently. How long is it since you last crossed the threshold of this club, I wonder?’

It was not much time that Matthew had to spare for frequenting that establishment, nor of late had he been able to bestow a thought upon social obligations. His practice was rapidly increasing; winter visitors had arrived in large numbers; he had been well spoken of by influential persons; possibly—though he was not aware of it—his intimacy with a lady of title and his relationship to a baronet may have helped to swell the list of his patients. But he knew of no reason why

he should not accept Mr Frere's invitation, and he willingly did so, only adding that he would have to go home first to change his clothes and see whether there were any messages for him.

Mr Frere, who liked company, seldom went into Wilverton without bringing some stray man or other back to dinner from the club ; so that his wife was always prepared to receive an impromptu guest. When Matthew entered her drawing-room, about two hours later, she said it was charming of him to come and enliven their solitude, and looked as if she meant what she said ; but it struck him at once that Anne, who approached with slow steps from the other end of the long room, was not quite equally charmed. Although she smiled upon him as she shook hands, and had no longer the air of holding herself aloof which had vexed him on the occasion of their last meeting, his faculty for quick observation told him immediately that she was wishing him away. He was momentarily hurt, feeling that he had done nothing to forfeit the friendship which, only a short time before, she had seemed so willing to extend to him ; but he forgave her as soon as he noticed the dark circles under her eyes and perceived that she was nervous and out of sorts. Innumerable causes suffice to throw the complicated human machine out of gear, and he had not the vanity to imagine that he could have been one of them in this instance. Very likely she had had bad news of her brother and did not want to be troubled with entertaining a guest while she thought it over. Or possibly she was simply suffering from a headache. At

all events, he resolved to display practical sympathy by troubling her as little as he could help.

With Mrs Frere at his elbow, it was easy enough to avoid making conversational demands upon anybody else. His hostess was much interested in Lady Sara Murray, whom she remembered to have met in the days of her youth, and whom she declared to be the only decent member of a family whose conduct had not been precisely conspicuous for decency. There was so much to be said about Lord Kingsbridge and the unfortunate Lady Laura Keane, and one set of reminiscences led by such an easy process of transition to another set, that dinner was half over before Mrs Frere thought of inquiring what sort of a girl Lilian was.

‘Well, I am very glad to hear that,’ she said good-naturedly, when Matthew had drawn a vivid and enthusiastic portrait of the young lady in question. ‘People may say that beauty is no use in these days without money, but my belief is that men always have been, and always will be, attracted by it. If she is anything like what her mother used to be, she ought to marry much better than her mother did. Take care that you don’t lose your own heart to her, that’s all!’ Then she put up her glasses, contemplated her neighbour and exclaimed,—‘My dear Mr Austin, you are positively blushing! Anne, do look at Mr Austin! Is he turning pink, or is it only the rose-coloured shades on the candles?’

Anne smiled very slightly, but returned no answer; Mr Frere burst into a loud laugh, while Fräulein Backfisch, the remaining member of the party, gazed modestly down at her plate.

Fräulein Backfisch had rather strict notions upon the subject of propriety and had already been a good deal scandalised by the freedom with which Lady Laura Keane's escapades had been discussed.

There are moments when kind-hearted, thick-skinned people tempt their less favoured fellow-creatures to do or say something extremely unpleasant to them ; but Matthew, whose heart was as kind as his hostess's, if his skin, unluckily for himself, was not quite so thick, displayed no resentment. He only laughed and said,—

‘ You are enough to make anybody blush, Mrs Frere. I shall expect to be accused of nourishing a secret and hopeless passion for your daughter Maggie next. By the way, am I to be allowed to see Miss Maggie this evening ? ’

The change of subject proved effectual, and Maggie, when she came down to dessert, was agreeably loquacious ; but Matthew did not enjoy himself very much during the interim. Why, he wondered for the hundredth time, cannot women understand that a doctor, when engaged upon professional duties, ceases to be a man, just as a parson does when similarly employed ? It is because they will not realise this that silly little jokes are made which are sometimes taken in earnest, and which are apt, in the long run, to turn out destructive of all comfort. To be sure, it was scarcely in his professional character that he had asked Mrs Frere to call upon the Murrays and had described Lilian in terms of such fervid admiration ; still, if Lady Sara had not been ill, he would never have had anything to do with her or her daughter.

Anne, who had only opened her lips once or twice from first to last, save for the purpose of putting food between them—and who, as he observed, had not opened them very often for that purpose—had disappeared by the time that Mr Frere suffered him to leave the port and return to the drawing-room. She was not feeling very well, her mother said, and had gone upstairs.

‘I suggested,’ added Mrs Frere, ‘that, having you on the spot, she might as well consult you ; but Anne always declares that solitude is her best medicine. Fortunate, perhaps, considering that she is fated to have so much of it, poor dear ! Well, now, George, what shall we do to amuse Mr Austin ? I suppose he wouldn’t care to play dummy whist.’

‘I shouldn’t think he would,’ answered the old gentleman, with his back to the fire. ‘I expect he would much rather let you go to bed, and come to my den for a quiet smoke.’

‘Do what ? revoke ?’ asked Mrs Frere. ‘Now, George, you know very well that I never did such a thing in my life.’

Her husband, a trifle jocose after his three glasses of port, placed a hand on each side of his mouth and shouted in a stentorian voice,—

‘Lucy ahoy ! I did *not* say that you would revoke ; I said you had better go off to bed and let me and Mr Austin smoke.’

Mrs Frere raised her pretty little hands to her ears and then struck at him with her fan.

‘Isn’t he rude ?’ she exclaimed. ‘This comes of living down in the country from year’s end to year’s end. His manners deteriorate every day. Go away, then, both of you.’

I am not quite ready for bed yet, but I won't keep you from your cigars.'

But Matthew protested, truthfully as well as politely, that he would much prefer half-an-hour's chat with Mrs Frere to a cigar. He would have to go in about half-an-hour, he added, because it was by no means certain that he might not find some urgent summons awaiting him on his return home. So he seated himself near the pretty old lady, whose prettiness and charm were still rather those that belong to youth than to age, while her husband sank into an easy-chair on the opposite side of the fire and was soon fast sleep.

It was pleasant and soothing even to look at Mrs Frere, as she sat there, with all her costly little knick-knacks, refinements and luxuries around her, and still more so to listen to her while she enlarged complacently upon the inconveniences and discomforts of pauperism. She had been purchasing an additional supply of bulbs, she said, but had been obliged to deny herself some of the newer and more expensive varieties. 'One can't attempt to go in for competition with one's wealthy friends when one's purse is all but empty and the end of the year is still so far off.' Then she related how Harry had written in the best of spirits, and how she hoped that, sooner or later, Lord This or Lord That would secure a staff appointment for him. Dick, it appeared, had recently got into trouble at Windsor Fair and had suffered the extreme penalty of school-law in consequence—'But he seems to be rather proud of his achievements than otherwise, and I am sure flogging must be good for boys. Such a mistake to try and abolish it, don't you think so?

‘Though I can’t say I should like it myself.’ Anne and Maggie also came in for their share of mention and more or less compassionate discussion ; but to her eldest son she did not allude even remotely. Yet she must have guessed that her hearer had by this time been made at least aware of the existence of that black sheep.

Her hearer, nursing his knee and gazing at her with his head a little on one side, was thinking what an enviable, not to say admirable, specimen of the human genus she was. Nobody could call her selfish ; she was evidently wrapped up in her children and quite unsuspecting that other people might be bored by long disquisitions upon their several perfections and imperfections ; still it could be surmised that her buoyant temperament would tide her comfortably over any calamity that might be in store for them or her. She was one of those thrice happy few who are content to let things happen to them, who do not attempt to control the course of events very much, who have but a slight sense of personal responsibility and who are almost incomprehensible to the nervous and anxious amongst their fellow-beings. Mrs Frere was not at all incomprehensible to Matthew ; but he could easily believe that she might be that, and provoking into the bargain, to her daughter. The more he saw of this really delightful and amiable family, the more he realised the complete isolation in which one member of it must necessarily dwell.

‘Of course it is her own fault,’ he mused ; ‘but one can no more help faults of that kind than one can help being tall or short, fat or thin.’

When you come to think of it, the number of things that can be helped is quite astonishingly small. Matthew was thinking of this when the butler came in to tell him that his dog-cart was at the door and when Mr Frere, waking up with a start, rubbed his hands and declared that there was snow in the air. He was thinking of it while he said good-night to his entertainers and absolutely refused to let the old gentleman accompany him into the hall; he continued to think of it after he had struggled into his heavy overcoat and had emerged into the starry night. Some snow had actually fallen while he had been sitting by the warm fireside and the ground was thinly powdered with it; but the clouds had now dispersed and a hard frost had set in. Away went the mare with a loose rein, notwithstanding the outspoken remonstrances of the groom; her heedless driver was occupied with other problems than that of keeping her upon her legs, and perhaps, after all, she was better able to take care of herself than he was to take care of her.

Of what avail, indeed, are knowledge, experience, good will, salutary precautions? The same stupid blunders are committed over and over again, as generation follows generation; sin and disease remain unconquered; ninety-nine mortals out of every hundred act in obedience to inherited tendencies; if young men see fit to go to the deuce, if young women choose to fret vainly over the ruin of their brothers and if fathers deem it their duty to be stern and implacable, the philosophic mind can only console itself with the reflection that there is a bright as well as a dark side to existence. Nevertheless,

it is not easy to sit still and make no sort of effort, however small, towards brightening dark places.

Now, it came to pass that, while Matthew was thus cogitating, he reached a place where the darkness in which he had hitherto been travelling was brightened by the rays of the gas-lamps which the Wilverton Local Board had set up, at rare intervals, on the outskirts of their town; and these, falling upon the buttons of a military overcoat, drew his attention to the wearer thereof. A soldier in cavalry uniform is not an everyday sight in those parts; still, Matthew's curiosity would doubtless have been satisfied by a passing glance, had not this soldier and his female companion drawn back somewhat hastily on the approach of the dog-cart. They did not draw back quite hastily enough. The female companions of private soldiers do not generally appear in dresses of the material and colour worn by Miss Frere at dinner, nor is it very much their habit to sally forth at night in thin shoes and long, fur-trimmed opera-cloaks. Matthew involuntarily drew rein; but his impulse was but momentary, and he immediately laid his whip across the flanks of the mare, who resented such uncalled-for treatment by throwing herself into her collar, whisking her tail and breaking into a gallop.

'So that's it, is it?' thought he to himself, as he narrowly avoided collision with the next lamp-post. 'Well, the fellow might do worse than go in for soldiering, and I have no business to spy upon her. All the same, he ought to be ashamed of asking her to come out, all by herself, in the middle of the night, and she risks catching her death of

cold, if she runs no other risk. At least, he will see her safe home, I suppose. I wonder whether she knew that I recognised her! Anyhow, I hope she knows that I shall not betray her.'

But that, as it happened, was exactly what Miss Frere did not know.

CHAPTER VII

A LITTLE ESCAPADE

THE two persons whom Matthew had left standing upon the footpath just outside Wilverton remained silent for a moment or two, while they watched the rapidly-retreating dog-cart. Then the man in the military overcoat remarked,—

‘Not much of a coachman, that chap. I didn’t recognise his face; do you know who he is?’

‘Oh, yes, indeed I do!’ sighed his companion. ‘He is Mr Austin, the new doctor, who, as I told you, has been dining with us this evening; and the worst of it is that I am quite certain he saw me.’

The other laughed.

‘What a popular doctor he will be for the next few weeks! Miss Frere sneaking out in the dead of the night to meet an unknown Tommy Atkins alone!—it can’t be every day that he gets such a first-rate bit of scandal as that to retail to the old women. This is what comes of being so reckless.’

‘But you told me to meet you here, Spencer,’ pleaded Anne reproachfully; ‘you said it was the only way.’

‘Oh, no, my dear girl; excuse me; it was you who said that. I, having nothing to lose and precious little to gain, should

have been game to walk up to the front-door and ring the bell. Besides which, I mentioned that a letter, enclosing a cheque or postal order, would answer all immediate purposes.'

'Don't talk like that! What pleasure can it give you to hurt me, when the time is so short and we may not see each other again for months or years?'

He shrugged his shoulders. He was a tall, good-looking young man, with a heavy, fair moustache. His hair was plastered down in a wave over his forehead and his cap was jauntily set on one side, after the fashion affected by the branch of the service to which he belonged. A close observer might have guessed that he was a gentleman by birth; but he seemed to have assimilated the outward aspect of his fellows.

'I talk like what I am,' he declared; 'if you expect me to be what I once was, you expect an impossibility. People who associate with brutes become brutes—there's no help for it—and you can't have the slightest idea what brutes those fellows are. Fine soldiers, too, and as plucky as you like; but—well, you must live amongst them to know what they really are. If I hadn't a very fair prospect of being promoted to sergeant before long, I should desert.'

'But you have that prospect, and you say the colonel is inclined to do all he can for you. You won't be so crazy as to throw away your only chance, will you, Spencer?' asked Anne anxiously.

'Oh, I don't suppose I shall desert. For one thing, it wouldn't be easy, and for another thing, I should feel that I had defrauded myself by having gone through this hell

upon earth without compensation. Still, there are moments when one longs to take a short cut to the real hell—if there is such a place—and have done with it. A week of cheap debauchery, and then a jump into the canal or over a railway-bridge in front of the express—painful for one's family of course ; but one's family would probably survive the shock.'

Anne did not give utterance to the apprehensive cry which may have been expected of her. She knew her brother, and was well aware that, although he might do many foolish things out of bravado, suicide was not likely to be one of them. After a pause, she began to question him about the possibility of his eventually obtaining a commission. What steps could be taken on his behalf ? Did he think that Colonel Egerton would be willing to recommend him ? Would it be necessary to wait a long time before the desired promotion could be asked for ?

The young fellow jerked up his shoulders again.

'Upon my word, I can't tell you,' he answered. 'I believe commissions used to be given rather more freely some years ago than they are now ; too many gentlemen have taken to enlisting in these days, you see. If it came to that, I daresay the old colonel would back me up, for he isn't a bad old sort and he happens to like me ; but I expect a good deal of interest in high quarters would be wanted. After all, what would be the use ? A man can't live in the 22d Lancers upon nothing a year, and you know whether my dear papa would be likely to make me an allowance or not.'

'I think he would,' Anne returned ; 'I think you forget what provocation he has had, and how natural it is for him to feel

that he can't trust you. But if it were proved to him that you really wished to make a fresh start, and that you had worked hard for it, I believe he would be ready to forgive you. Anyhow, it is worth trying for, isn't it? Especially as there is nothing else to try for.'

'H'm! In the meantime, there are other and more attainable blessings which are quite worth having, I assure you. Beer, for instance. Well, no; we won't say beer; we will say socks and underclothing and pocket handkerchiefs, and perhaps a decent cigar once in a while, for a real treat. I am sorry to appear greedy, but the time is getting short, and I warned you just now that I have become a slave to brutish appetites. My dear Anne, how much coin have you brought with you?'

It was not very much; for her allowance had of necessity been curtailed, and her mother did not like to see her shabbily dressed; but she gave him all that she could spare—in fact, to be strictly accurate, she gave him a good deal more than she could spare—and he accepted the amount with a careless word or two of thanks. Then he was in a great hurry to be off. He had not much more than time to catch the train to the cathedral town where he was quartered, he said, and he did not expect that he would obtain permission to absent himself until so late an hour again.

'But you can write when you like,' he added, laughing, 'and you can enclose a postal order as often as you please. The smallest contributions thankfully received.'

'Yes,' answered Anne meekly. 'But, Spencer—stop one moment!—what am I to do about Mr Austin? Had I not

better tell him the truth when I get an opportunity? He must have seen us, and he may not have guessed—men are often so extraordinarily stupid!—he may not have guessed who you were.'

'By all means tell him, then; personally, I don't care a button who knows that I am a non-commissioned officer in the 22d Lancers. All the same, I doubt whether he will believe you, and I'm sure he won't thank you for spoiling a good story. If I were you, I should swear through thick and thin that his eyes had deceived him.'

'Mr Austin is a gentleman,' said Anne rather coldly; 'I am not in the least afraid of his mentioning what he saw as a good story. Only he might imagine—'

'Well, my dear girl, I can't help your friend's imaginings, and it's no fault of mine that you are in this equivocal position. I warned you that the game wasn't worth the candle. Now, I really must bolt to the station.'

He submitted to her long, clinging embrace, and kissed her lightly on the cheek as he disengaged himself. Of course he did not enjoy being hugged; he never had liked such demonstrations even in the old days, nor do brothers ever care about being hugged by their sisters. This was what Anne said to herself in order to make him out less callous than he affected to be; but, for all that, she had not many illusions respecting him. She remained motionless until the sound of his quick, ringing footsteps upon the hard ground had died away; then she turned with a sigh to speed upon her homeward journey.

Anne was no coward; still she did not altogether relish the

prospect of that long tramp along the lonely road. It had been one thing to slip out and hasten through the falling snow, sustained by the hope of seeing Spencer once more ; it was a somewhat different thing to retrace her steps, with possible detection awaiting her at the end of her walk and many other disagreeable possibilities attendant upon the course of it.

Now, she had not advanced very far, hugging the shadow of the bare hedgerows and stepping as noiselessly as she could across the grass, when her attentive ear caught the distant sound of hoofs and wheels. She stood still and listened. Yes ; there could be no doubt about it ; a vehicle of some sort was approaching rapidly from the direction of the town. Presently she knew that it was a two-wheeled vehicle, and then a horrid suspicion flashed across her mind which was verified almost as soon as formed. In the bright moonlight that high dog-cart, that fast-trotting roan mare, that seated figure in the thick driving-coat were only too clearly recognisable. Mr Austin kept turning his head from side to side as he drew nearer ; quite evidently he was looking for somebody. Really it was a little unfair and not a little impertinent of him to behave as he was doing, and for a moment Anne thought of casting herself full-length into the dry ditch by the wayside until he should have passed. But what would have been the use of doing that ? Since an explanation was inevitable, the sooner it was made the better ; so she emerged from the somewhat ineffectual ambush afforded by an elm-tree, and waited calmly in the middle of the road until he pulled up beside her.

He took off his hat and said, in the most matter-of-course tone in the world,—

‘May I drive you as far as your gates, Miss Frere? I am going that way.’

Without noticing his offer, she replied,—

‘I was sure you had seen me. I don’t know why you should have thought it necessary to pursue me, but I am glad you haven’t brought your groom with you. Perhaps I had better tell you at once that the soldier to whom I was talking when you passed, on your way home, was my brother.’

‘Of course it was. I guessed that at once, and I may tell you, for your comfort, that you were not recognised by the groom. I said a word or two to him about the cavalry soldier just to satisfy myself that he had suspected nothing, and I found that it was all right. And indeed I did not come out again in pursuit of you ; it is perfectly true that I have to go and see a patient who lives some miles beyond Hayes Park ; a note from his wife was waiting for me when I reached home. I plead guilty to having left James behind, much against his will, because I thought it not unlikely that I might overtake you ; but I did not contemplate giving you a lift home when I started. I thought your brother would surely take the trouble to escort you as far as the lodge.’

‘He couldn’t ; he was obliged to catch a train. And nothing could have happened to me ; there are no tramps about at this time of year. It is very good of you,’ Anne added, with a more friendly intonation, ‘to take this so sensibly.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about sensibly,’ said Matthew laughing.

‘Can you manage to climb into the cart without my getting down? I can’t quite trust the mare to stand, unless she has somebody at her head. There! that’s all right, and will you put this plaid over your shoulders, please? I don’t know so much about sensibly—a sensible man might think it his duty to inform Mr Frere. But I have my own little ideas upon the subject of duty, and you may rely upon me to hold my tongue. Nevertheless, if I may take the liberty of saying so, I do trust you will not repeat this escapade. It really is dangerous—horribly dangerous; though perhaps not to life or limb.’

They were speeding along the high-road again by this time, and Anne, obedient to instructions, had enveloped herself in the doctor’s warm plaid.

‘Yes, I know it is,’ she answered meekly enough; ‘but I don’t think it will happen again, and if you keep my secret, I am not likely to be found out this time. Nurse, who knows where I have been, is sitting up for me, and will let me in through the window of the housekeeper’s room. I couldn’t resist going out to-night; I don’t know when I may have another opportunity of seeing poor Spencer.’

‘Well, it was a plucky thing to do; I only hope he appreciates your courage and unselfishness. So that was why you looked as if you were wishing me at Jericho when your father brought me in to dinner!’

‘Did I look like that? I am sorry if I did; but of course your being there rather complicated matters. I was so afraid mamma would insist upon my remaining in the drawing-room.’

After a short pause she asked,—‘What made you conjecture at once that the soldier was Spencer?’

‘Could it possibly have been anybody else? I am glad, for your sake, that he has taken the Queen’s shilling. He might have done very much worse, I should think.’

‘Oh, he *has* done worse,’ answered Anne with a melancholy little laugh; ‘but whether this will help him to do better eventually or not I’m sure I don’t know. It isn’t in him to persevere with things, and I hardly dare to hope that he will ever get his commission. If it were possible to tell papa what he is doing, there might be a chance; because we have still a few friends in high places, though we have dropped so completely out of society.’

‘But isn’t that possible?’

She shook her head.

‘Not at present. We aren’t allowed even to mention Spencer’s name, and there would be a terrible explosion if it were to appear that I had been corresponding with him all this time. It isn’t that my father is unforgiving; he has forgiven again and again; only there are people—of course you must know that—who are forced to make themselves out relentless just because they are a little afraid in their hearts of relenting. Oh, no; I am sure he would never consent to ask a favour of anybody for Spencer; the one hope would be to get the commission without his having heard anything about it. Then he would have a fair excuse for saying that a fresh start had been made and that the past had been partly atoned for.’

‘I see. Well, it isn’t much influence that I can boast

of with official personages ; but my brother, I believe, has some and is rather fond of exercising it. Would you mind my applying to him? He is very cautious and trustworthy, and even if he refused to help, he would not chatter about anything that had been imparted to him in confidence.'

Anne was kept silent by a sudden access of the shyness from which she had been free up to that moment, but which now rendered her somewhat unwilling to lay herself under obligations to comparative strangers.

'You are very kind,' she said constrainedly at length.

'That means "Mind your own business!"'

'No ; I didn't mean anything so rude and ungrateful as that ; but—'

'But you doubt whether I could be of much assistance to you, perhaps? Very likely I can't ; still, it is a mere question of writing a note, and Godfrey, as I tell you, is perfectly safe. It seems rather a pity to leave any stone unturned.'

Anne could not but agree that it was. She assented presently to the writing of the note, remarking apologetically that she knew of no one else to whom it would be safe for her to avow that she had been holding communication with her brother.

'And I suppose it wouldn't be necessary for you to say anything about me in writing to Sir Godfrey, would it?'

'Oh, dear, no ! I should only explain the circumstances as concisely as possible and say that I wanted to do some little thing towards repaying all the kindness and hospitality that

your family have shown me. That will sound natural enough, and will satisfy Godfrey, who is not inquisitive.'

'You are very kind,' Anne repeated.

But this time she spoke as if she meant what she said, and in truth she did mean it. Perhaps she exaggerated a little the value of such kindness as she had received and might be going to receive at Matthew's hands; perhaps she scarcely realised that to be of service to his fellow-creatures was as sincere a pleasure to him as the promotion of our personal enjoyment is to the rest of us; still, as a matter of fact, he had refrained from placing her in an awkward predicament and had volunteered to aid her towards accomplishing the object nearest to her heart—not to speak of having given her a very welcome lift and the loan of a much-needed wrap.

The wrap, however, had to be surrendered presently, notwithstanding his earnest entreaties that she would keep it until she should have an opportunity of returning it to him.

'Thank you very much; but I shouldn't dare,' she said, after she had made him stop beside a stile, some three or four hundred yards short of the lodge; 'one of the servants might see it, and then questions might be asked. I sha'n't catch cold during the few minutes that it will take me to run across the park. Good-night, and a thousand thanks! If ever I am able to do anything for you in return—but it isn't much use to say that, I am afraid.'

'There are several things that you could do for me without loss of time,' Matthew declared. 'Have you a fire in your bedroom?'

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Then warm yourself thoroughly in front of it before you go to bed ; that’s one thing. Another thing that you might do would be to make friends, if you can, with that Miss Murray about whom I was speaking to your mother. The poor girl is lonely, and it would make all the difference to her to have some nice friend.’

‘Very well ; I will do what I can,’ Anne promised.

‘In that case, I think we may cry quits, as far as we have gone. By the way, don’t build too much upon Godfrey ; it is only a sort of hit or miss attempt, you know, and he may very likely say that he can do nothing at the Horse Guards. Anyhow, I’ll let you know as soon as I hear from him.’

He watched Anne’s tall, slim figure across the snow-covered grass until a belt of evergreens concealed it from view ; after which he drove on. He was filled with compassion and admiration for her, and was pretty well pleased with himself into the bargain, now that there seemed to be some definite prospect of assisting her. The quiet satisfaction with which he recalled their colloquy was not disturbed for a moment by any suspicion that he had made a somewhat maladroit request in begging her, as a favour to himself, to take Lilian Murray under her special protection. That was the sort of ignoble idea which would never have found its way into Matthew Austin’s mind, for all his exhaustive acquaintance with the intricacies of human nature.

CHAPTER VIII

MATTHEW MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL

MRS FRERE was notorious throughout the neighbourhood for the lenient view which she took of her liabilities in the matter of paying visits. Busy she could hardly be called ; but, like many other persons who have no settled work to do, she was never without a plausible excuse for procrastination, and although she spoke every day of calling upon Lady Sara Murray, she allowed a fortnight to elapse before redeeming her promise to Matthew Austin. Perhaps she would not have made her way to Prospect Place even then, had she not been forcibly dragged thither by her more conscientious daughter.

Anne, to be sure, was not precisely consumed with anxiety to make the acquaintance of these two ladies, whom, for some reason, or for no reason, she did not expect to like very much ; still, she remembered that Mr Austin had made a point of her showing something more than ordinary civility to the younger, and her conscience reproached her for a delay which, after all, was no fault of hers.

Lady Sara, who seldom left the house, was at home, and her daughter was reading the newspapers to her when the visitors were announced. Anne, following in Mrs Frere's wake, scrutinised the girl with some curiosity. The girl was unques-

tionably very pretty, perhaps even beautiful; but whether her mental were on a par with her physical gifts it was not easy to discover. At all events, it was not very easy to talk to her; nor, for the matter of that, did Anne ever find it very easy to talk to girls. She did her best; she asked such questions as seemed appropriate; she hoped Miss Murray would come to tea with her some afternoon; she suggested country walks and spoke of the dances which were usually given about Christmas time; but she elicited little more than monosyllabic replies. Lilian evidently did not take to her, and she, on her side, did not take particularly to Lilian. Anne often felt that she was predestined to be an old maid and that young people looked upon her as having prematurely fulfilled her destiny. Before long she had exhausted her list of possible topics; so that she was driven in despair to listen to the conversation of her elders, hoping that she might derive some fresh ideas from that source.

Her elders were getting on swimmingly, and experienced none of the embarrassment with which she was afflicted. Mrs Frere always had plenty to say for herself, and, as she knew a great many people whom Lady Sara knew, she had the good fortune to be interested as well as interesting. In these latter days a coterie has been formed in London, the members of which are understood to have bound themselves to converse only of things, not of people. It is a rule to be admired rather than imitated. We cannot all of us be so superior as that, and why should we be forced to proclaim our inferiority by remaining mute when we are really provided with quite a large number of fascinating subjects to discourse upon? Mrs Frere and Lady

Sara discussed social celebrities to their hearts' content, and enjoyed the process so much that Anne had to wait fully five minutes before they dropped down to the mention of a humble individual with whom she also could boast of being tolerably intimate. However, when they did reach Mr Austin, they had nothing but the most unqualified laudation to bestow upon him.

'It seems rather eccentric of him to be a doctor,' Lady Sara said. 'But I am sure I ought to be the last person to complain of his taste, for he has done me an immensity of good, besides cheering us up with constant visits for which he won't accept any payment. I was obliged to ask him, the other day, what I owed him, because money is an object with me; and how much do you suppose his account came to? Three guineas! I was really ashamed; but he assured me that his regular professional charges amounted to no more than that, and that, if I wanted to pay him for looking in when he had nothing else to do, he wouldn't be able to come again until he was sent for.'

'That is the advantage of having a gentleman for one's medical attendant,' observed Mrs Frere placidly. 'One doesn't mind mentioning the subject of fees to him; one knows he won't have any silly affectation about it, as poor old Jennings had. Not that we have mentioned the subject to Mr Austin yet; and I don't suppose we shall until after the new year, when one's poor little dividends begin to come in. We are all quite devoted to him—all, except Anne, who doesn't bestow her friendship upon man or woman until she has summered them and wintered them. To be sure, Mr Austin is one of

these middle-aged sort of men who get on best with old people and children. I daresay your daughter, for instance, finds him a somewhat tedious person.'

Lilian rather astonished one of her hearers by the warmth with which she repudiated this imputation.

'Whatever Mr Austin may be, he isn't that,' she declared. 'I don't know what we should have done without him all this time, and if the other people who live hereabouts are half as amusing to talk to as he is, Wilverton can't be as dull a place as it looks.'

The inference was not precisely flattering, and Lady Sara, who had had some experience of her daughter's occasional frank utterances, showed symptoms of nervousness; but Mrs Frere only gathered that the girl liked Mr Austin and nodded smilingly back at her. After a few more words the subject dropped, and Lilian relapsed into taciturnity. As for Anne, she was more than ready to depart when her mother at length rose. She had done what in her lay to make friends with this beautiful but not (to her) very attractive Miss Murray, and her advances had not been welcomed. She could say nothing further; it was no fault of hers if she was less amusing to talk to than Mr Austin. As she followed Mrs Frere down the steep, narrow staircase, there was a decided feeling of resentment in her mind against Mr Austin, who might, she thought, have had the common sense to understand that girls of a certain and tolerably numerous class never derive amusement from intercourse with members of their own sex. But when she emerged into the semi-darkness outside, she had to forgive Matthew;

for there he was, helping Mrs Frere into the carriage, and before showing the same polite attention to Anne, he took occasion to say hurriedly, in a low voice,—

‘I am so glad to have chanced upon you! I have heard from Godfrey, and I want to tell you what he says. When could I see you alone?’

She had no time to do more than answer,—

‘I shall be at St Mark’s on Sunday afternoon. Could you contrive to be there? Then you might walk part of the way back with me.’

‘All right,’ said Matthew; ‘I’ll manage it.’

Indistinct eulogies of Miss Murray’s loveliness and facetious warnings to Mr Austin to beware of Cupid’s darts were proceeding from the obscure interior of the landau, where Mrs Frere was making herself comfortable with a fur-lined rug and a foot-warmer. The young doctor responded with the jocosity which the occasion seemed to require; after which Anne took her place and the vehicle was set in motion.

‘Really and seriously,’ Mrs Frere remarked, when she had kept silence for a minute or two, ‘I think he had better be careful, poor dear man! That girl is simply exquisite! I couldn’t take my eyes off her all the time I was talking to Lady Sara, and it wouldn’t surprise me to hear that he was in much the same case. No wonder he charges nothing for his visits!’

‘I suppose there is no harm in his looking at her, if he likes,’ Anne said.

‘Well, that depends. I wouldn’t look at her more than I could help if I were a country doctor.’

But Anne, during the last few minutes, had made up her mind not to trouble herself about matters which did not concern her. The matters which did concern her, and with which Matthew had been so kindly pleased to concern himself, sufficed to engage her whole attention; if he chose to admire Lilian Murray, he was at liberty to do so, and no exception could be taken to his taste. Meanwhile, the chief question to be considered was whether it would be practicable to attend afternoon service at St Mark's, Wilverton, on the following Sunday afternoon, unaccompanied. To walk as far as the town on Sunday afternoons for the purpose of being present at St Mark's, which boasted of an old-fashioned cathedral service, a fairly good choir and an organist of florid propensities, was a practice to which she was much given while the days were long; but her father did not approve of her being out alone after dark, and she was much afraid that, on hearing of her intention, he would either offer to escort her himself or insist upon her being followed at a respectful distance by the footman.

There is, however, as most daughters and some sons are aware, one excellent way of avoiding paternal frustration of their intentions—which is to say nothing about them. When Sunday came, Anne employed this simple method with success, and as soon as she reached the church she had the satisfaction of beholding the back of Matthew Austin's curly head in a prominent position. There was no sermon, and the anthem was a short one, so that it was still comparatively early when the worshippers trooped out, leaving behind them one of their number, who seemed to experience some difficulty in getting on her

gloves. Anne, knowing that Matthew had seen her and not wishing to be accosted by other acquaintances whom she had recognised amongst the congregation, did not hurry herself. She allowed them plenty of time to disperse before she moved down the darkening aisle to the porch, where a tall gentleman, with a bundle of letters in his hand, was patiently waiting for her. She glanced interrogatively at these documents while responding to his greeting.

‘Well?’ she said.

‘Well, I have pretty good news for you. I have been in correspondence with Godfrey, who is quite inclined to bestir himself, and indeed has bestirred himself. Luckily, he happens to be acquainted with your brother’s colonel, which has rather facilitated matters. Of course you won’t have expected to hear that a commission could be granted to-morrow, but there really seems to be every hope of its being granted before very long, provided that—’

‘Yes?’ said Anne, catching her breath.

‘Provided that no hitch occurs. In short, to speak plainly, provided that your brother continues to behave with ordinary circumspection.’

They had left the church and were walking slowly down the quiet street which gave access to it. The sun had already set; the stars were becoming visible and a chilly wind was beginning to blow from the north-east.

‘Ah,’ sighed Anne, after a prolonged pause, ‘that’s a large proviso!’

Her manner of receiving what should surely have been

a welcome communication was so unexpectedly despondent that Matthew could not help laughing.

‘But, my dear Miss Frere,’ he remonstrated, ‘the authorities could hardly make a more modest stipulation than that, could they? I must tell you that, according to my information, these promotions of gentlemen from the ranks are becoming less and less frequent. One can understand that there are obvious objections to what, after all, must partake a little of the nature of favouritism; besides which, it appears that commanding officers don’t, as a rule, like having gentlemen in the ranks at all. I suppose that, as a rule, these gentlemen-rankers are not particularly apt to be circumspect, and I was thinking that it would be just as well for you to mention, when you write to your brother—’

‘Oh, I won’t fail to do that,’ interrupted Anne; ‘the only question is whether he will listen or have patience. What has he been doing? You have heard something, I am sure.’

‘No, indeed; nothing of any real consequence. Colonel Egerton speaks most highly of him in a military sense and is evidently anxious to push him on. I believe there have been some peccadilloes, but at present, so far as I understand, there is no serious obstacle in the way of his advancement.’

‘And how long will he have to wait, do you think?’

‘Ah, that I can’t say. He must reach the highest non-commissioned rank—troop-sergeant-major, I think they called it, but I am very ignorant about military matters—before he can be recommended for a commission; only I gathered

that his promotion up to that point might be made tolerably rapid. Perhaps he would have to wait a year.'

'Oh, a year!—that sounds manageable. I was afraid it would be three or four years at least.' She turned towards her companion, at whom she had not hitherto been looking, and exclaimed, in an altered tone,—‘What a wretch you must think me! You have been taking all this trouble for me, and I have not even said “Thank you” yet! I suppose I didn’t dare to be thankful until I could hope that your trouble would be rewarded. But I do hope now, and I do thank you from the bottom of my heart.’

Matthew really deserved some thanks; for he had taken more trouble about this business than he had cared to confess. Although he was not upon unfriendly terms with his brother, he would have preferred not to ask a favour of Sir Godfrey, and, as a matter of fact, his first letter had not been very graciously received, Sir Godfrey having declared, in reply, that it would be out of the question for him to use his influence on behalf of a young man who had avowedly gone to the bad, while he professed himself quite unable to understand on what grounds he had been requested to do so. Thereupon Matthew had hastily journeyed up to London, had managed to move the reluctant baronet to action, if not to sympathy, and had likewise called upon a certain high official at the War Office whom he had once attended in a dangerous illness. The high official, fortunately, had not forgotten Mr Austin, though he shook his head and pursed up his lips when the nature of Mr Austin’s errand was unfolded to him. However,

he promised to make inquiries, and the upshot of it all had been that Matthew, after his return home, had received the sheaf of encouraging letters which he now held in his hand. His task had not been an altogether pleasant one, because he had had some difficulty in explaining why he took such a particular interest in young Frere, and he had also been informed of episodes in young Frere's past and present career which did not redound to the credit of that warrior; still he had been rewarded by ultimate success, and he had no intention of telling Anne what uncomfortable moments the pursuit of success had caused him to pass through.

‘Oh, you had better thank Colonel Egerton, if you must thank anyone,’ he answered lightly. ‘My share in the transaction was simply to beg somebody to beg somebody else to do what could be done.’

She opened her lips as if to speak, but closed them again and walked on for some little distance in silence. She and her escort had left the streets behind them, had passed through a gate and were crossing a pasture coated with hoar-frost before she said,—

‘I understand perfectly well whom I have to thank, and I am all the more grateful because I am sure you hated begging anything of anybody. It is hateful to have to beg; but how can one help it, when one is asking on behalf of one's own flesh and blood? The worst of it is that Spencer is nothing to you, and you must have heard things about him—I know by what you said just now that you must have heard things.

I wonder whether you would mind telling me what they were.'

Well, he really could not tell her exactly what he had heard ; so he took refuge in evasion.

'You are much too apprehensive,' he replied ; 'your brother wouldn't have been a sergeant now unless he had a pretty clean regimental record, you may be sure. One doesn't expect the average young man to be a saint ; but at any rate he doesn't appear to have taken to drinking, and that, they say, is the rock upon which gentlemen who enlist are most apt to wreck themselves.'

'Are you sure of that ?' asked Anne quickly.

'I am sure that Colonel Egerton said so. Have you any reason to fear the contrary ?'

'I suppose I have reason for every kind of fear. Mr Austin, I don't want to deceive you, and I can't deceive myself, about Spencer. He is not to be trusted, and I feel now as if I had had no business to let you make yourself in a way responsible for him. If he were to desert, or to do some other disgraceful thing after this, your brother would be very much displeased with you, wouldn't he ?'

'I don't think so,' answered Matthew ; 'but if he were, I could make shift to endure his displeasure. Don't begin to worry yourself with morbid ideas which there is nothing in the case to warrant. You have done your best, and I have done my little best, such as it has been. Let us rest satisfied with that knowledge and talk about something else. How did you like the Murrays ?'

Anne, being a truthful person, had to confess that she had not hit it off particularly well with Miss Murray.

‘But I daresay that was my own fault,’ she added magnanimously. ‘I don’t make friends very easily, and the things that interest young girls don’t interest me much. However, I will do my best to cultivate her, if only because you asked me to do so, and because it is my bounden duty to do all I possibly can when you ask me.’

‘You will like her when you know her better,’ Matthew declared confidently. ‘She is a mere child as yet, and she has childish *gaucheries*, but when once she is at her ease, she can chatter as quaintly as anybody I ever met in my life. I am sorry for her, too, for I am afraid there is no hope that her mother will ever be really well again, and one doesn’t see what sort of future lies before her.’

‘She will marry somebody, I suppose.’

‘Yes—but whom? The first that comes, provided that he is rich enough and aristocratic enough, I am afraid. A common-place fate; but a pathetic one all the same.’

He enlarged upon this theme, which, with Anne’s occasional comments thereupon, sufficed to keep the conversation alive until Hayes Park had been reached. The truth was that he did not wish to be catechised any further about Sergeant Frere of the 22d Lancers, and his companion was quick-witted enough to divine that much. However, on taking leave of him, she could do no less than reiterate her thanks, to which she added a promise that he should not regret his kindness if she could help it.

‘After all, when so much is at stake, he can surely keep steady for one short year!’ she exclaimed half-interrogatively.

‘Oh, dear me, yes, I should think so,’ was Matthew’s encouraging reply.

CHAPTER IX

UNFORESEEN PERIL

IT falls to the lot of doctors and parsons to see many strange things, and they are, or ought to be, much less easily astonished than the rest of us. Anglican clerics, it is true, learn remarkably little, as a rule, considering what their opportunities are, because they lack that preliminary training which is of so much value to their brethren of the Romish communion ; but the average English doctor knows a good deal, and may be relied upon to exercise the average English common sense in dealing with the facts before him. Matthew Austin, therefore, ascribed no more importance than it deserved to an episode which might have had uncomfortable results for Miss Frere, if not for himself, nor did he think it incumbent upon him to go out of his way in order to call at Hayes Park and ascertain what he had omitted to ask on the occasion of their last meeting, whether she had effected her midnight entry without detection. Hearing nothing in the course of the next few days, he assumed—and was quite correct in assuming—that she and the nurse had managed matters successfully between them.

For the rest, he was a little disinclined to seek further occasions of private parley with Anne, fearing lest she might insist upon hearing more about her brother than it was desirable that she

should hear. Colonel Egerton's confidential report respecting the latter had, in truth, been somewhat disquieting, although from a strictly professional point of view it had been satisfactory enough. The letter which had been handed over to Matthew by the official personage at the War Office was brief and frank.

‘Personally, I like the man,’ the colonel wrote. ‘I think he would make a first-rate officer, and I have had one or two talks with him and given him some good advice. But whether he will keep straight or not I can’t say. I don’t believe he drinks; only it is always one of two things, you know, and in his case I suspect that it’s the other thing. He is too good-looking and too much given to swagger. Of course all the women here—the so-called ladies, I mean—have found out that he is a gentleman, and it would not surprise me to hear at any moment that he had got himself into a scrape. I only say this in order that you may breathe a word of warning to his friends. I can’t very well speak to him upon the subject, except in general terms.’

That was tantamount to saying that an advance from the general to the particular might be made without indiscretion by Sergeant Frere’s friends, and Matthew, after some hesitation, had decided to address a few lines to his unknown *protégé*, quoting Colonel Egerton’s remarks, and venturing to add a few comments of his own thereupon. No answer had reached him, nor, in fact, had he expected any; but he had his own misgivings, grounded upon some previous acquaintance with good-looking, swaggering and ostentatiously reckless young men.

Meanwhile, he was forced to recognise regretfully that his attempt to bring about an intimacy between Anne Frere and Lilian Murray had been a failure. Lilian, when casually interrogated upon the subject, confessed candidly that she did not like Miss Frere.

‘I went to tea with her yesterday,’ the girl said, ‘and I should have yawned my head off if I hadn’t been particularly cautioned by mamma to mind my manners. Besides, as she is such a friend of yours, I thought I would try my very best to be amiable. But she frightened and froze me. I suppose she never makes you feel inclined to swear at her, does she?’

‘I can’t say that she has produced that effect upon me as yet,’ answered Matthew, laughing.

‘Well, she produces that effect upon *me*. Oh, not because of anything that she says or does; only because one can’t help wondering what the consequences would be. I see you don’t understand, and I can’t explain. You like people because they are good.’

‘One might have a worse reason for liking them.’

‘Yes; but it’s a reason for disliking them when one isn’t over and above good one’s self, and when they *are* over and above good. You are as good as gold; but then you have a different way of showing your goodness.’

All this was so manifestly unfair that Matthew could only hold his peace and reflect that fairness towards one another is not the common attribute of women. He might have gone a little further and remembered that jealousy is their universal attribute, had he not been determined to look upon Lilian Murray as a

mere child. To suppose that her jealousy could have been aroused by his frequently-expressed admiration for Anne Frere would, according to his view, have been a little too ridiculous.

He now ceased, however, to express that admiration with so much frequency, because praise of the absent was never yet known to overcome prejudice. It was a pity that two ladies so charming in their respective fashions could not hit it off together ; but since they could not, there was no more to be said. Lilian, too—so, he was informed, when he paid his hurried daily visits to her mother—was in less urgent need of companionship than she had been. Wilverton was filling rapidly ; the gouty and rheumatic arrivals included, as might have been anticipated, a few acquaintances of Lady Sara's, and these had brought with them relatives who were not yet of an age to understand the meaning of stiff joints. Lilian was no longer forced to rely solely upon her own resources for killing time, while Lady Sara herself was enlivened by remote contact with the outer world.

The unfortunate thing was that this natural craving for contact with the outer world was apt to bring her into contact with the outer air more often than her medical adviser could think prudent. He did not like to forbid drives with friends who had a comfortable carriage at her service and whose society was good for her spirits ; but he feared that these well-meaning people were not quite as careful as they should have been to avoid exposing her to raw cold, and, dropping in at Prospect Place late one evening, he found, sure enough, that she had at last caught the chill which he had dreaded. He packed her off to bed at once, prescribed remedies and hoped for the best ; but it

was no surprise to him to be called back, a few hours later, and to discover that his patient was undoubtedly in for an attack of bronchitis.

‘We have taken it in time, and we ought to be able to stave off serious mischief,’ he told the alarmed Lilian. ‘We won’t meet trouble half-way, anyhow. I have given full instructions to the nurse, but if it would be a comfort to you to see me, you must not scruple to send for me at any hour of the day or night.’

She would not, in any case, have been likely to be troubled with scruples on that score, for she had implicit faith in Matthew’s powers and probably did not think that other patients of his might be as much in want of him as her mother was; but poor Lady Sara soon became so ill that there was every excuse for the imploring message which reached him before he was up on the following morning. He hastened to Prospect Place as soon as he had put on his clothes, and could not disguise either from himself or from those about her that the sick woman was in a bad way. Complications which he had dreaded, but had preferred not to anticipate, had set in with unexpected suddenness, and whether he would be able to pull her through or not was a very doubtful question indeed.

In emergencies of that crucial kind Matthew always instinctively assumed his professional manner; so that Lilian was rather overawed by the concise, peremptory orders issued to her, and hardly ventured to inquire what was the matter. She would not have understood if she had been told, and indeed he told her no more than that they had now pleurisy as well as

bronchitis to contend against ; but later in the day he thought it his duty to ask whether she would like to have a second opinion, and to offer, in that case, to telegraph to London for her.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered, catching her breath ; ‘how can I tell? Won’t you advise me about what I ought to do?’

Matthew considered for a minute or two.

‘Well,’ he replied at length, ‘I am willing to take the entire responsibility upon myself. I say this, knowing that you may blame me hereafter, and I would not say it unless I were absolutely certain that the whole College of Physicians could give me no real help in the present instance.’

‘Do you mean that there is no hope, then?’ asked the girl with quivering lips.

‘No ; I only mean that I have not the slightest doubt as to the method of treatment. More than that I must not say ; it is for you to choose.’

She chose instantly and unhesitatingly—not, of course, understanding that Matthew had risked a severe blow to his reputation in order to spare her pocket.

‘If you can’t save mamma’s life, nobody can,’ she cried. ‘And,’ she added, after a moment, ‘whatever happens, you may be sure that I shall never be such a wretch as to blame you.’

Well, he was glad that she had decided to trust him. He could but do his best, and he knew that no eminent London colleague could do more than he was doing ; but during the week that ensued he had a very anxious time of it. Sometimes he felt almost sanguine, but more often he despaired. The

odds against the patient's recovery were too formidable to be overcome by skill ; her only chance lay in a stock of vitality with which he had no reasonable ground for crediting her.

Nevertheless, skill counts for something, and a day came at length when he was able to say that he had gained the victory which he had set himself to gain. Lady Sara, exhausted and barely conscious, might or might not sink in the course of the next twenty-four hours ; but her disease, or rather diseases, had been beaten. This was what he told Lilian, whose courage and self-command had won his enthusiastic admiration during the trying time through which she had passed, and to whom he now knew that he might venture to speak in plain language. She, on her side, had learnt to regard him with that species of unquestioning adoration which women usually reserve for priests. Perhaps she did not realise—not knowing how busy he was—the extent to which he had sacrificed hours which should have been devoted to rest and food in order that he might be as constantly as possible in attendance upon her mother ; but she did know that it was he who had enabled her to endure the long ordeal of watching and nursing, and that his unflagging cheerfulness alone had preserved her from giving way to despair. Already she had begun to wonder what would become of her when the blow which seemed to be almost inevitable should have fallen, and when there would be no further need for a doctor's services in that house.

‘If only it were to-morrow morning!’ she sighed wistfully. ‘Do you think you will be able to come quite early?’

‘Oh, I’m only going away for about an hour,’ he answered.

‘There are two people whom I *must* see ; but I have arranged with Dr Jennings about the others, and I mean to stay the night here. That will enable you to go to bed, which it is absolutely necessary that you should do. You may depend upon me to have you called in case of any change.’

She had become so docile that it no more occurred to her to dispute his commands than to protest against his sitting up all night. She only ejaculated,—

‘Oh, what a mercy ! I feel as if nothing very bad could happen while you are here. But must I undress ? I am so dead tired that I could sleep quite soundly on the sofa in the sitting-room.’

Matthew, after a moment’s consideration, made the concession required of him.

‘It isn’t the same thing,’ he said, ‘and I can’t have you falling ill upon my hands through sheer over-fatigue. Still, for this one night, you may keep your clothes on. Afterwards you will have to remember that it is indispensable for you to husband your forces.’

‘But will there be an afterwards ?’

‘Well, well ! At all events, you must sleep, and I see by your eyes that sleep will come, whether you wish for it or not. Now it is time for me to be off. I won’t be absent for more than an hour and a half at the outside.’

He was not absent quite so long as that. The ‘arrangement’ which he had concluded with Dr Jennings was simply the handing over of certain patients to that bland practitioner, who had pointed out, with equal courtesy and firmness, that it would

be not only improper but impossible for him to enter into anything which might have the appearance of a partnership with Mr Austin. Matthew, therefore, was free for twelve hours to come, and congratulated himself upon his freedom. Only the nurse was in Lady Sara's room when he returned. Lilian, as he had anticipated, had succumbed to irresistible physical weariness and was sleeping heavily upon the sofa in the sitting-room, the nurse said.

He gave orders that she was on no account to be disturbed, dismissed the nurse to take an hour or two of the rest which she also urgently required and seated himself by the bedside. There for a long time he remained, watching the semi-conscious sufferer, whose ceaseless movements gave him little encouragement, and deftly administering nourishment to her every now and again. She was going to die; he was almost sure of that now; and mingled with his professional sense of disappointment and failure was an intense pity for the helpless girl whom she was about to leave behind her. It was so easy to foresee what would happen!—the period of dependence upon annoyed relations, the hastily-arranged *mariage de convenance*, the results which, in most cases, follow such unions as a matter of course. And all this because the age of miracles is said to be past, because Providence no longer interferes with the process of Nature, because dying women cannot be kept alive in order that mundane affairs may run more smoothly!

‘Are we punished for our want of faith, or are we only meant to understand that our responsibilities are greater than we have chosen to assume?’ Matthew wondered.

But soon after midnight something took place which lifted

the burden of immediate responsibility off his shoulders and which may have been an answer to his half-formulated prayers. He had not expected it; for a few seconds he scarcely dared to believe in it; but presently he satisfied himself that he had made no mistake and that his patient was at last quietly slumbering. The nurse had by this time returned, and he whispered to her that he was going to impart the good news to Miss Murray, whom he could hear stirring in the adjoining room.

‘I believe we shall pull this case through, after all,’ he murmured hopefully.

To which the woman replied,—

‘It’s thanks to you, sir, if we do.’

Well, that might or might not be so; but thanks which, if a little premature were wholly irrepressible, at all events awaited him. Lilian, hardly yet awake, was standing, with dazed, wide-open eyes, beside the sofa when he entered, and at his first words, her self-control, which she had maintained with so much difficulty during many anxious days and nights, forsook her altogether. She burst suddenly into hysterical weeping, she seized Matthew’s hand and kissed it, passionate words and sentences, intended to express the gratitude which was perhaps his due, and attributable, as every reasonable man must have perceived, merely to her over-strung condition, broke from her lips. Matthew, who was nothing if not reasonable, soothed her to the best of his ability, and tried not to listen more than he could help to what she was saying. One doesn’t, of course, listen more than one can help to the delirious

ravings of those who, for the time being, have ceased to be sane fellow-creatures. But where does sanity end and insanity begin? If that question could be answered, a good deal of trouble might be averted.

Anyhow, it was by no means certain yet that the great trouble which threatened Lilian Murray could be averted, and this was what Matthew strove to explain to her as soon as she had in some degree recovered her composure. Her mother, he assured her, was still very dangerously ill. There had been a turn for the better, and he had hopes now which he had not entertained a few hours earlier; more than that he could not feel justified in saying. But Lilian would have none of these stereotyped phrases.

‘As if I could not see by your face that you have saved her!’ she exclaimed, half laughing through her tears. ‘Oh, and you have saved me too! if you only knew! It is horrible to be so selfish and to think of anything or anybody except her; but I couldn’t help it. All this time I have felt certain that I should lose her, and there isn’t another creature in the world who cares a pin for me. It is what she has always dreaded—dying before I married—we have often talked about it. You see, ours has been a rather unfortunate family, and she was afraid—when one is obliged to find a home somewhere, one can’t pick and choose—’

These incoherent avowals were intelligible enough to Matthew, who was unable to respond to them in his customary quasi-paternal tone. He was unable, in fact, to respond to them otherwise than a little gruffly; for it had dawned upon him all

of a sudden that the regard which he felt for Lilian Murray was not paternal at all, and that it behoved him to take very great care what he said. That, notwithstanding the warm language which she had employed just now, she could entertain any sentiment towards a country doctor, save one of somewhat exaggerated gratitude, was, of course, as much out of the question as it would have been for him to abuse the position of trust in which he was placed; yet, in the event of a not improbable contingency, might she not do worse than become the wife even of a country doctor, who loved her?

But this latter query was one which merely flitted across Matthew's brain while he was regaining his hold over himself and making the girl swallow a few drops of sal volatile. If his own nervous system had been temporarily shaken almost as much as hers, he had had far more practice in reducing it to submission, and he soon recovered his natural voice and manner. On quitting her, however, to return to Lady Sara's room, he inwardly determined not to see her again before the morning. The nurse should be sent to her, he promised, when her mother woke.

CHAPTER X

AN UPSET

OF all the triumphs that fall to the share of the fortunate among mankind, how many are due to desert, and how many to simple good fortune? Modest field-m Marshals, prime ministers, patentees of epoch-making inventions, renowned jockeys and other shining lights—it must be said for these heroes that most of them are quite modest—are wont to ascribe their several exalted positions to the latter rather than to the former cause. Still, nothing succeeds like success, and, when all deductions have been made, the rough-and-ready rule of judging by results remains the only safe one open to us. Possibly Lady Sara Murray recovered from her dangerous illness, not because she had an excellent and most attentive doctor, but because her constitution was a tougher one than it appeared to be ; but this did not prevent Mr Austin from reaping immense credit for having snatched a patient out of the very jaws of death, nor, to tell the truth, did it prevent him from triumphing in a quiet way when nobody was looking on.

He stood at his dining-room window, one morning after breakfast, gazing out at the brown, empty flower-beds and the ever-green shrubs, illumined by pale rays of winter sunshine, and said to himself that this sort of thing was worth living for. A week

had elapsed since that critical night when he had all but made up his mind that Lilian Murray was to be left an orphan, and he was now able to affirm that immediate risk of that catastrophe was at an end. Whether through his skill alone, or only through his skill supplemented by favourable circumstances, Lady Sara was about to enter upon the convalescent stage, and, after all, the labourer is worthy of his hire. It was a legitimate triumph which he was fully entitled to enjoy.

But what—beyond the enhanced reputation to which he attached no more value than it merited—was his hire? And why was he in such exuberant spirits as to be unable to help ejaculating aloud that life was worth living? He was not greatly given to introspection, or he might have felt it his duty to take himself to task somewhat severely upon these points. There is surely no great cause for exultation in having fallen desperately in love with a girl of little more than half your own age and considerably more than double your own social importance. A man who allows himself to behave in that way is no better than an ass, while, if he were to contemplate taking advantage of a family physician's opportunities for the furtherance of projects upon which lovers are usually intent, he would be rather worse than an ass. But Matthew was troubled with no such unpleasant reflections. It was perfectly obvious to him that Lilian Murray was, for all practical purposes, as far removed from his reach as a royal princess; he no more dreamt of declaring his love than of asking himself whether, by any wild possibility, it could be returned; he was simply satisfied with seeing her every day, with knowing that, for the time being, he had made her

happy and with noticing how her face lighted up the moment that his own came within her view. There exist, amongst the endless varieties of human beings, a few of his sort ; men and women who are genuinely—constitutionally, it may be—unselfish, and who, without any figure of speech, are fonder of their fellow-mortals than they are of themselves.

From one point of view it was doubtless fortunate both for Matthew and for Lilian that they were ignorant of the reports which were being industriously circulated about them by Mrs Jennings and other unemployed old ladies ; for, had they been aware of these, their intercourse must necessarily have become less unembarrassed than it was. But one of them, when he went his daily rounds, was in too great a hurry to listen to gossip, while the other heard nothing and saw nobody. A certain number of professedly anxious inquirers did, indeed, get as far as the door of the house in Prospect Place, but no farther. Lilian sent reports of her mother's condition down to them, but steadily declined to receive them, alleging that she did not feel fit to do so. She would not even see Mrs Frere, who brought flowers and grapes and who was goodnaturedly desirous of cheering the poor girl up. It was Matthew who encountered that kind-hearted lady just as she was upon the point of driving away one day, and who was beckoned to and questioned by her.

‘Can’t we be of any use?’ Mrs Frere wanted to know. ‘One doesn’t wish to be a nuisance ; only one would like to do what one could, and it makes me wretched to think of poor little Miss Murray without a single friend to speak to in her trouble.

Oh, I know she has you, and you have been quite indefatigable, they tell me ; still, you are a man, you see, and men, with the best will in the world, can't understand exactly how to deal with girls.'

If a delicate hint was intended to be conveyed by this remark it was lost upon Matthew, who thought he knew quite well how to deal with Miss Murray, and who had no suspicion that the gossips were busy with his name and hers. What caused him a moment's self-reproach, when Mrs Frere had left him, was that he had forgotten to inquire after Anne—had, indeed, for some little time past almost forgotten Anne's existence. To be sure, as he reflected, half commiserating, half laughing at himself, there had been excuses for him. Who doesn't forget his friends when he has been goose enough to fall in love ?

The danger that lay before him no doubt was that he might forget not only people, but certain things which it was very necessary for his peace of mind to remember. Associating, as he did, with Lilian and her mother upon terms of equality, he might insensibly drift into a false estimate of their respective stations, might even allow himself to cherish hopes which were palpably absurd. Lady Sara, sitting up in bed, and being now permitted to talk as much as she liked, administered an anticipatory corrective, one day, which was all the more effective because it was evidently dictated by no *arrière pensée*.

'I can't deny that it is pleasant to feel one's health returning,' said she ; 'still, I am ever so much more indebted to you on Lilian's account than I am on my own. If you can patch me up enough to enable me to get through one London season,

I shall be ready to sing *Nunc Dimittis* and expire, blessing you. Of course, she is young, and one would gladly have waited a year or two; but I must not think of that—there isn't time. With her face, and with the connections I have managed to keep up, a husband of the requisite rank and means ought to be discovered for her without much difficulty.'

'Is it so certain that rank and wealth are essential to happiness?' Matthew inquired.

'Oh, yes, I think so. At any rate, wealth is. You see, my dear Mr Austin, I am not in a state to maintain pretty fictions—even if anybody did maintain them nowadays. Grim realities stare me in the face, and I have seen a good deal of the world in my time. I wish it were what poets and romance-writers try to make it out; but unfortunately it isn't. Lilian is like a thousand other girls and will be like a thousand other women; she may miss the very best that is attainable, but I hope to provide her at least with the second best. And I suppose we all know what that is.'

Matthew supposed that we did. With a rather heavy heart he went down to the door, where his dog-cart was waiting to take him several miles out into the country. He had an out-lying patient to visit, and as he drove at his usual rapid pace through the raw, moist air and along the muddy roads, he meditated upon what the second best was likely to mean in Lilian's case. Some horrible old Marquis of Carrabas, perhaps, or some recently ennobled plutocrat, either of whom would weary of her charms and neglect her sooner or later. Well, then there would remain the consolations of jewels, dresses and

an abundance of creature comforts—possibly also the more legitimate consolation of maternity. It is useless to pretend that these things do not console ; one must needs look truth in the face. But there are moments when Truth seems to wear so ugly a face that one would fain leave her at the bottom of her well and shut down the lid.

Matthew was precluded by the honesty of his nature from having recourse to that measure ; so his spirits gradually sank lower and lower, as the shades of evening fell, although he knew no more now than he had known from the first. He had seen his patient and was returning towards Wilverton, when a young man on a bicycle shot noiselessly past him splashing some mud into his face and starting the mare into a gallop. Matthew had one of his wheels half-way up a bank before he knew where he was ; but his customary good luck preserved him from an upset, and presently he succeeded in checking the mare, while James, the groom, delivered himself of some forcible remarks upon cyclists in general and upon the young man who had so nearly caused an accident in particular.

‘I wish he’d break his dratted neck, that I do!’ ejaculated the irate James ; ‘such fellers ain’t fit to live!’

‘Upon my word, James, I believe you have got your wish!’ exclaimed Matthew, as the sound of a crashing fall some distance ahead caught his ear. ‘He is down, anyhow, and had a nasty cropper, I suspect. This comes of tearing downhill a hundred miles an hour.’

It was the work of little more than a minute to overtake

the reckless cyclist, who was discovered prostrate beside the heap of stones which had brought about his disaster, his broken and twisted machine lying near him. He was not unconscious, but he had cut himself a good deal about the face and seemed to be somewhat dazed, as well as very angry. After Matthew had rendered him some preliminary services, he relieved his feeling by objurgating bicycles with a vehemence which would have done credit to James himself. Then he remarked,—

‘I don’t know how many bones I’ve broken, but I can’t move either of my arms without swearing. If you happen to know of any local Pill-box residing in the neighbourhood, it would be an act of charity to drive on and tell him that he’ll find me by the wayside. You might just mention that my name is Jerome and that I’m staying with my uncle, Mr Litton, at the Grange. I daresay he’ll know my uncle.’

‘I myself happen to be a local Pill-box,’ answered Matthew good-humouredly, ‘and if you will let me hoist you into my cart, I will drive you to the Grange without jolting you more than I can help. You have broken your right arm—I am not sure about the left—and I will set it for you as soon as I get you home ; that is, unless your uncle, who is not one of my patients, prefers to send for somebody else.’

The stranger accepted this offer with many thanks, and apologised for having inadvertently spoken of the Good Samaritan who had come to his aid as a Pill-box. Of course, he remarked, he wouldn’t have done it if he had known. It was no easy matter to lift him over the wheel and place him in a semi-recumbent attitude upon the front seat, for he was a very tall

and rather heavy young man ; but with the help of James the feat was accomplished, and Matthew, resuming the reins, started the mare at a gentle pace towards Wilverton Grange, a large, modern mansion, with the whereabouts of which he was well acquainted.

His neighbour, at whom he glanced from time to time, was a handsome, as well as a powerfully built fellow, with black hair, dark blue eyes and regular features. He had no hair about his face, and could afford to follow the modern custom of shaving clean, since there was no fault to be found with the shape of his mouth. Just now his countenance was adorned with sundry cuts and bruises and he was evidently in a good deal of pain ; but this he bore uncomplainingly. What vexed him, it appeared, was that he should have been the victim of a bicycle accident.

‘I shouldn’t so much have minded coming to grief out hunting or in a steeplechase,’ he observed ruefully ; ‘that would at least have been respectable. But to be smashed up by an idiotic machine like that !—well, it will be a lesson to me. After this, I do hope my uncle will see how inhuman it is to ask a fellow down here for a fortnight and never offer to put up his horses. The very least he can do now is to pay the coach-builder in Wilverton from whom I hired that brute of a thing. I expect he’ll have the additional pleasure of entertaining me for another month, eh ? How long does it generally take to get over this sort of business ?’

Matthew replied that he could not possibly give an opinion without knowing what the extent of the injuries was. He was inclined to suspect that the young man was rather badly hurt ;

but, of course, he did not say so, and he made for Wilverton Grange as quickly as circumstances would permit. Of the wealthy and eccentric bachelor to whom that establishment belonged, he had heard something from Mrs Jennings, but, not being inquisitive, had forgotten the greater part of what the well-informed lady had told him. The place had been built many years before by Mr Litton, who had likewise purchased, by degrees, a vast extent of adjoining property, and had consequently become, in a certain sense, the great man of the neighbourhood. He was in the habit of contributing munificently to local charities and public works; he lived all by himself, he never called upon anybody, and he was reported to have an uncommonly nasty temper. That was all that Matthew could remember about him.

What most people would have remembered, as a more or less interesting detail, was that he had a nephew—the shattered bicyclist, in fact—to whom it was generally assumed that he would some day leave the whole of his possessions; but that, it is true, was none of Matthew's business. His business was to ascertain what was the matter, and he proceeded to do so with all possible celerity, after halting beneath the imposing Grecian portico of the Grange and hastily informing the butler and the footman of the accident which had occurred. Mr Jerome was silently and swiftly taken upstairs—the servants being evidently anxious above all things to avoid alarming or disturbing their master—and, at the end of a careful and prolonged examination, Matthew had the satisfaction of announcing that a pair of broken arms practically constituted the sum of the mischief done

‘Not that that isn’t enough,’ he remarked, looking down compassionately upon the victim ; ‘only, it might have been much worse. As it is, I am afraid you will have to resign yourself to a little immediate pain and some weeks of helplessness. I have done as much as I can for the present ; but I will despatch my groom for the things that I want and stay with you until he comes back, if you like ; subject, of course, to your uncle’s approval. Very likely he would rather send for his own doctor.’

‘Oh, he be hanged !’ returned the young man. ‘My body is my own, if my soul isn’t, and I suppose I am entitled to choose who shall put it into plaster of Paris for me. If you’ll be good enough to undertake my case, I shall be only too grateful. I can see that you have light hands and that you know what you’re about. All I beg of you is that you won’t let the old man come in here, if you can help it. He is apt to be exasperating, and I don’t feel quite fit to be exasperated just now.’

The speaker had by this time been put to bed and was being attended to by his valet, who seemed to be a quiet and capable sort of man. Presently Matthew went away to give the requisite instructions to James, and was returning towards his patient’s bedroom when he was intercepted at the top of the staircase by a little old gentleman, leaning upon a stick, who said, in a thin, sharp voice,—

‘Mr Austin, I presume?’

Richard Litton was a man at whom nobody could look once without looking a second time, although his appearance could

scarcely be described as prepossessing. Bent, undersized and wearing a short, grey beard, while his upper lip was shaved, he did not impress the beholder as being either handsome, amiable or well-bred, and his pinched features, shaggy eyebrows and piercing grey eyes conveyed the idea that they might belong to a miser. Avarice, however, was by no means one of his somewhat numerous defects, nor was his heart as hard as his forbidding manner suggested. Moreover, there was a certain indescribable aspect of power about his countenance which commanded attention, if not respect. He said he had been told by the butler of what had happened, put a few quick, pertinent questions and ended by remarking,—

‘Well, I have always employed Dr Jennings, and I shall continue to employ him when I am ill. I wish that to be clearly understood, please. But you are a younger man, and I daresay Leonard is better off with you. I am told that he is anxious to be left under your care. After all, it is only right that you should mend his bones, for I suppose you began by upsetting him and breaking them. I have heard that you are notorious for careless driving’

‘That may be,’ answered Matthew; ‘but it was not I who upset your nephew. On the contrary, he very nearly upset me; after which he proceeded to upset himself.’

‘Indeed? Well, Mr Austin, I am obliged to you for the trouble that you have taken, and so ought he to be. But he is an ungrateful fellow, you will find.’

‘Oh, there hasn’t been any trouble,’ answered Matthew, laughing a little. ‘Except, indeed, in hoisting him into the dog-

cart. That, I must admit, was a troublesome job, for he is no light weight.'

'I understood you to say that he had broken his arms,' observed Mr Litton. 'I don't see why that should make it necessary to lift him. At least, I am not aware that he is in the habit of walking upon his hands.'

'No; but if you will try to get into a dog-cart with your arms tied behind your back, you will find that your legs are not of as much service to you as usual.'

Matthew was rather surprised at perceiving that this rejoinder, which had not been meant to give offence, was taken in very ill part. He had not noticed that his interlocutor was slightly deformed, having one leg shorter than the other, and it was not until some time afterwards that he learnt how morbidly sensitive Mr Litton was upon the subject. The old man drew his shaggy brows together and said, in cold, polite accents, which contrasted with the half-good-humoured brusquerie of his previous utterances,—

'You will, no doubt, be detained for some little time longer, Mr Austin, and I hope you will do me the honour to eat your dinner here. I must ask you to excuse me from entertaining you personally, as I seldom take my meals in the dining-room, but I can trust my butler to take care that your comfort is not neglected. I have received an intimation that my nephew does not desire to be troubled with me; so I will not intrude upon him to-night. I wish you good evening, sir.'

He moved away very slowly—so slowly that his lameness was barely perceptible—until he reached a curtained doorway, through which he disappeared.

‘Temper soured by prosperity and solitude and the consciousness of expectant heirs,’ thought Matthew. ‘Health probably indifferent, too ; for his chest is contracted and there is a look of suffering about that hard, firm mouth of his. Men of his sort are very much to be pitied ; still, all things considered, I am rather glad that he is not my uncle.’

CHAPTER XI

THE CANTANKEROUS UNCLE

IF Matthew was not much prepossessed in favour of the uncle, he soon formed a high opinion of the nephew. There are people whose virtues demand patient excavation, while there are other and more fortunate folks whose fine qualities lie upon the surface for every eye to see and take pleasure in. Leonard Jerome's great popularity was probably due to the fact that he belonged to the latter class, and indeed his worst enemies—supposing that he had any enemies at all—could hardly have refused him credit for courage and good-humour. Matthew had to give him considerable pain, and he neither winced nor protested under it; nor did he grumble more than was natural and pardonable at the prospect of a prolonged period of helplessness, to which he was told that he must make up his mind. It is by no means everybody who is so cheerful or so reasonable as that, and Matthew, on concluding operations, felt impelled to say,—

‘I wish all my patients had your pluck!’

‘When one doesn't like the inevitable, there is nothing to be done but to lump it,’ observed Mr Jerome philosophically. ‘The really disgusting thing is to be punished in this way; for an ignominious mishap which one will never be able to

mention to one's friends without being sniggered at. That, and being laid up in Uncle Richard's house, of all places in the world! I suppose he is in a thundering rage, isn't he?'

'He did not appear to be so,' Matthew replied. 'I think he was a little bit afraid that I might seize this opportunity of representing myself as his medical attendant, and he wanted to make out that it was I who had caused your accident; but he was kind enough to offer me dinner.'

'Well, you'll get a good dinner, anyhow. And by the way, you must be about ready for it. Please go down and refresh yourself and don't bother any more about me. I shall be all right with my man to look after me. He knows my little ways and won't quarrel with me for cursing him, as I daresay I shall, every time he moves me. What a mercy it is that I have brought him with me! I was within an ace of leaving him in London, because Uncle Richard hates having strange servants in the house, and a more cantankerous old beggar than my dear uncle I have never yet met. It is the chief aim and object of my life to keep friends with Uncle Richard but I haven't made a bright success of it so far. Now go and get your dinner. Very many thanks to you for your clever treatment of me.'

Matthew's surgical treatment was always clever; but this particular case had afforded him no scope for doing more than any ordinary country practitioner could have done. Still, it is never disagreeable to be thanked, and he went downstairs very well pleased with his new acquaintance. As for the dinner, which was presently set before him, and which was deftly

and silently served by the butler, it was beyond all praise. Now, Matthew, as has already been hinted, was not indifferent to creature comforts, while he loved small refinements. The spacious, well-warmed dining-room, the excellence of the subdued taste displayed in its furniture, the few admirable modern paintings which adorned its walls—all these things appealed to him; nor did he fail to take note of the thoughtfulness which had spared him the annoying and superfluous presence of several domestics. Mr Litton, it was evident, was not only blessed with a first-rate *chef*, but with a delicate appreciation of the manner in which solitary guests ought to be entertained.

‘Cantankerous he may be,’ Matthew mused, after he had been left by the butler with cigarettes and a cup of coffee; ‘but he can’t be altogether selfish, or it never would have occurred to him to let me smoke in his dining-room. He himself doesn’t look at all like a smoker. Still, there’s no knowing. If that nephew of his doesn’t please him, he must be hard to please, one would think.’

That was exactly what the majority of Leonard Jerome’s friends, some of whom likewise enjoyed the privilege of a slight acquaintance with Mr Litton, did think. A man who couldn’t get on with Jerome must be an ill-conditioned sort of old fellow, these sagacious persons were wont to observe, and it was really very hard lines on poor Jerome that he should be compelled, by considerations of ordinary prudence, to visit his uncle three or four times in the course of every year. The only consolation for them and for him—especially for him—lay

in the thought that he would doubtless reap his reward ere long, Mr Litton being over seventy years of age, and visibly breaking up.

Meanwhile, Leonard Jerome was not so badly off but that he could very well afford to wait for a year or two. He had a property of his own in the far north of England, upon which, it is true, his income did not enable him to reside ; but as he had not the slightest wish to reside there, this could hardly be regarded in the light of a privation. His place was let, and he received a rent for it which, together with the interest of the personal property which he had inherited from his late father, sufficed to provide him with the means of leading a gay bachelor existence. And his existence, so far, had been gay enough to render those occasional duty-visits to Wilverton Grange quite endurable, by way of an alterative. What with his good looks, his well-known expectations, his proficiency in games and field sports and a certain vague, yet not wholly undeserved, reputation that he enjoyed for being cleverer than his neighbours, he was in immense request, and always had more invitations of one kind and another than he could possibly accept. Of ready money he had, if not quite as much as he wanted, at least as much as he had any business to want. He could hunt and shoot and yacht and give excellent little dinners to those whose hospitality he felt disposed or bound to return. There were many ladies who were of opinion that he could also marry ; but he had not as yet felt either bound or disposed to do that. So, upon the whole, he was a very enviable young man, and it was

scarcely wonderful that he should be a very amiable young man into the bargain. If amiability be not the outcome of an excellent digestion, a comfortable pecuniary position and freedom from worry, physiologists must know much less about us than they pretend to know.

To whatever causes it may be due, and whatever excuses may be urged on behalf of those who do not possess it, amiability remains an attractive quality, and Matthew Austin's liking for this spoilt child of Fortune ripened into friendship all the more rapidly because it was reciprocated. It was, perhaps, not absolutely necessary that he should drive out to Wilverton Grange every day during the week that followed; but he found time to do so, and his visits were hailed with such joy that he was tempted to prolong them to the last available moment. Indeed, it was impossible to help liking and sympathising with an unfortunate fellow who, after the first day or two, felt perfectly well, yet was condemned to absolute dependence upon others, and kept his temper through it all.

'There is this to be said for your comfort,' Matthew remarked, one afternoon, 'that you will be out and about again a good deal sooner than most men would, because you don't fuss and fret.'

'Oh, I daren't,' returned the other, laughing; 'I'm like the blind, who are always supposed to be such nice, cheery sort of people. They know very well that it would be as much as their place was worth to be anything else. If only I had the free use of my arms, my language would be something awful; but, as it is, I'm bound to be polite to a charitable

man like you or I should lose the only jolly hour out of the twenty-four. Just you wait until I cease to be a mummy, and see if I don't punch your head for you !'

'It will be some little time before your arms are strong enough to do that, you will find,' observed Matthew.

'Will it? Then perhaps I'll let you off. More especially as I am under some slight obligations to you. I'll tell you what it is, Austin; you may not be aware of it, and I don't suppose you are, but you are one of the very best fellows that ever stepped.'

'Because I sit and talk to you when I can?'

'Well, that is one sign; but you have betrayed yourself in other ways. You will never make your fortune, my dear Austin—it is easy to foresee that—but you will always have just as many friends as patients, which is probably what you would prefer.'

The two men had become intimate, and had learnt a good deal about one another during those daily hours of companionship, which had not once been intruded upon by the master of the house. Of that eccentric recluse Matthew had seen nothing more, while he understood that his patient had seen very little; but on this occasion, just after the doctor had risen to depart, there came a smart rap upon the door from a stick, followed by the entrance of Mr Litton.

The old man advanced towards the fire, held out a small, wasted hand to Matthew and then, turning to his nephew, said rather coldly,—

'I hope you are better to-day.'

‘Oh, I’m getting on, thanks,’ answered Leonard.

‘I am glad to hear it. This will put a stop to your hunting for the remainder of the season, I presume.’

‘Well, I suppose so. It can’t be helped.’

‘It might have been helped ; but that, to be sure, is your affair rather than mine. You will now, I should think, have had enough of balancing yourself on the top of a wheel, in emulation of shop-boys on Saturday afternoons ; so that you are, perhaps, to be congratulated on your experience. It is a pity that you should be deprived of hunting, though. Hunting is not an intellectual amusement, but it is certainly preferable to gambling at Monte Carlo, which is the only alternative I know of open to a man of your tastes during the latter part of the winter.’

‘What a charming way you have of putting things ! As a mere matter of detail, I have only once been to Monte Carlo in my life, and on that occasion I lost the large sum of ten pounds. Still, if it makes you any happier to call me a gambler, pray do so. Any stick is good enough to beat a dog with.’

‘I believe I am correct in saying that you do gamble. Whether at public or at private tables is not very much to the point.’

‘All right ; I’m a gambler. Now can’t we think of something a little more pleasant to talk about ?’

But Mr Litton evidently did not wish to be pleasant. He had—as Matthew divined at the time, and afterwards ascertained for certain—that querulous temperament which is more common amongst women than amongst men, which sometimes goes with physical deformity and which seeks quarrels rather in the hope

of a subsequent reconciliation than out of any ill-will towards the person quarrelled with. Such a man was naturally incomprehensible to a robust young athlete like Leonard Jerome, who saw no fun in snapping and snarling, and who, if his uncle had been poor, instead of rich, would doubtless have turned his back finally upon that cross-grained relative long ago.

There was more snapping and snarling in the course of the next five minutes than could be listened to with comfort. Of course, young people resent injustice—not having yet had time to learn that injustice must be accepted, with a shrug, as one of the unavoidable accompaniments of terrestrial existence—and although Mr Litton deserved the disrespectful retorts that he received, it was rather painful to notice how he winced under them. Matthew, being fond of young Jerome, wanted to get away, and took the first opportunity of making his escape. But hardly had he closed the door behind him when it was reopened to give egress to Mr Litton, who struck his stick sharply upon the floor to attract the retreating doctor's attention and then beckoned him back.

‘Are you in a hurry?’ the old man asked. ‘If not, I should be glad to have a word or two with you. Did you, by chance, read last week's *Lancet*?’

Matthew had read it, and had also perused an article upon which, to his surprise, Mr Litton began to talk with evident knowledge of his subject. The article in question had dealt with the treatment of a rare and obscure malady, and Mr Litton gave reasons for differing from the writer which, if not altogether novel, were entitled to consideration.

‘Why, you are almost as well posted up as I am!’ Matthew exclaimed, in astonishment. ‘When did you study medicine?’

‘In my spare moments, which are only too numerous. The greater part of my long life has been made up of spare moments, and I have studied many arts and sciences—to very little purpose. A few months of practical experience outweigh years of laborious reading. That is why I wanted to ask you whether, in any of the London hospitals, you had come across a case of the kind described. You used, I know, to do a good deal of hospital work before you got that nasty scratch which so nearly put a stop to your investigations for good and all.’

Nevertheless, it was not for the sake of adding to his store of medical erudition that Mr Litton was detaining the young doctor, with whose history and present mode of life he incidentally displayed a somewhat startling familiarity. Matthew divined that much after professional topics had been dropped and he had been conducted into his host’s picture-gallery, where there were some fine examples of the early Italian and Flemish schools. He was, likewise, acute enough to guess what was coming; and it came when Mr Litton had proved himself as well acquainted with the technicalities of the pictorial art as with several other subjects which had cropped up in the course of his monologue.

‘I see,’ the old gentleman remarked at length, ‘that you have a receptive mind. You don’t know much about art, but you would like to know more, and you recognise that our bodies are not the most important part of us—though a physician might be excused, if anybody could, for thinking so.

I wish you could manage to impart a few germs of infection to that nephew of mine !’

‘Oh, he is young yet,’ answered Matthew. ‘His mind won’t serve him any the worse in years to come because he is sensible enough to keep his body in good condition now. He will do, Mr Litton.’

‘No, he won’t,’ returned the other sharply. ‘At least, I doubt very much whether he will. Do you imagine that he is one of those brainless, good-tempered, muscular youths who sow their wild oats in due course and settle down into useful, steady-going country gentlemen? If you do, you are a worse judge of character than I should have taken you for. No, Mr Austin ; Leonard Jerome is no fool, and it follows that he can’t fool away his youth with impunity. I don’t mind telling you another thing : he won’t be allowed to fool away my money after I am gone, much as he would enjoy doing so.’

‘But is he fooling away his youth?’ Matthew asked.

‘That is a matter of opinion. I call it folly, and worse than folly, to live only for self-indulgence and for so-called sport. I grant you that an ass may do that without particularly suffering from it ; but Leonard has talents, and if he doesn’t choose to use them, he will assuredly end by misusing them. Nemesis is not a mythical goddess—or rather, her existence rests upon the truth, which is the foundation of all myths. Why isn’t he in Parliament? He might be, if he cared to take the necessary steps and go through the necessary preliminary training. But I need not ask you why, since I know. It is because he is too lazy and too selfish.’

‘I think you are rather hard upon him,’ Matthew said.

‘You won’t think so when you know him better. I can see that you and Leonard are going to be friends, Mr Austin, which is my reason for speaking to you in this way. You may have some influence over him, and you may advance his worldly prospects by exercising it judiciously. I need scarcely tell you that he is only here with a view to the advancement of his worldly prospects. My poor house would not often have the privilege of sheltering him if he thought that I intended to bequeath all I possess to public institutions and charities—a thing which I may very possibly do, by the way.’

‘It is a great pity,’ Matthew observed musingly, ‘to be so suspicious. Suspicions of that kind have a tendency to bring about their own justification—just as a man may make himself genuinely ill by morbid fears of illness. You ought to fight against them, instead of nursing them.’

Mr Litton stared. He was quite unaccustomed to being addressed with so much freedom, and he was not sure that he liked it. He ended, however, by breaking into a short laugh and remarking,—

‘You are not greatly in awe of me, Mr Austin, it seems.’

‘Why should I be?’ Matthew asked, with a pleasant smile.

‘Ah, that I can’t tell you; only most people are. Even my nephew is afraid of me; though there isn’t much reverence connected with his fear, I suspect. No doubt he has told you, in well-chosen language, how profoundly he dislikes me and how he wishes that I would die and have done with it.’

This was a rather awkward question to answer, backed up as it

was by the steady gaze of a pair of penetrating grey eyes ; but Matthew could reply truthfully,—

‘He has never expressed any wish for your death in my presence. I believe he is under the impression that you have a profound dislike for him, and it isn’t very surprising that he should be under that impression, is it?’

‘Possibly not. Well, Mr Austin, I won’t keep you any longer. Will you permit me—as an old man, who may claim the privilege of taking certain liberties—to say that, whether I like or dislike my nephew, I like you? I shall always be glad to see you, and my library contains a number of medical works which you might perchance care to consult at one time or another. As to Leonard, I daresay you will not forget what I have said about the probable effect of your influence upon him.’

Matthew went away half amused and half touched. Neither his influence nor anybody else’s could ever reconcile two natures so antagonistic as those of Mr Litton and Leonard Jerome ; but the simplicity with which the lonely old man had disclosed his craving for an affection which was certain to be denied him was pathetic enough, and it seemed at least possible that some *modus vivendi* might be brought about which would enable him to sign, with a clear conscience, the will that he so evidently desired to execute. Meanwhile, the confidences of the uncle and the nephew gave a fresh interest in life to one whose solicitude about the affairs of other people had become slightly diminished of late by an unwonted difficulty in forgetting his own.

CHAPTER XII

PHILOSOPHY AND PERVERSITY

IT stood to reason—or, at all events, Matthew Austin thought it did—that such a girl as Lilian Murray could by no possibility fall in love with a man of his age, pursuits and social position. Even supposing that, by some miracle or other, she should come to imagine herself in love with him, it would be out of the question for him to take advantage of a childish illusion. Nothing could be more obvious than that, before making up her mind, she must see the world and its inhabitants, make acquaintance with young men who belonged to her own small section of the community and realise—as no doubt she would—that she had hitherto lived in blank ignorance of certain indisputable facts.

But he had to repeat these reflections to himself with great frequency and insistence, because Lilian's demeanour towards him was not at all unlike what it might have been if she had suspected his feelings and had returned them. During those weeks when he had good-naturedly devoted all the time that he could spare to chatting with Leonard Jerome he had not, of course, neglected Lady Sara, whose progress towards recovery, though well maintained, had been somewhat slow, and, as a natural consequence, his interviews with Lady Sara's daughter

had been of daily occurrence. In after years he looked back upon those interviews with a queer sort of wonder and sense of unreality. It is trite enough moralising to say that we change as we grow older, and that, although we continue to bear the same name and carry about with us a body which is more or less the same, we are no longer the same men and women that we were five or ten years ago. Yet nobody quite believes this, and everybody is apt to be startled when the fact is abruptly brought under his or her notice—which, to be sure, very seldom happens.

Anyhow, that was a happy time for Matthew, notwithstanding the misgivings which he was quite right to entertain and even the occasional moments of self-reproach which would have been more of a trouble to him had he been less free from personal vanity. Doctors and clerics are accustomed to being adored by women. They make mental deductions, unless they are downright fools, and know, or ought to know, pretty well what such adoration is worth. Probably, however, it is not altogether disagreeable while it lasts.

Now, by way of changing a subject which, if persisted with too long, became a little trying to his modesty, Matthew was wont to talk to these ladies about such of his patients as he thought likely to interest them, and chief among the number was, as may be supposed, the luckless Mr Jerome, with whom Lady Sara in particular manifested much sympathy, not unmingled with curiosity.

‘You really must introduce him to me as soon as he and I are in a state to be introduced to one another,’ she said. ‘From what you tell me, I am sure he is just the sort of young man I

should like.' She added, with a slight laugh, 'Perhaps—who knows?—he may also be the sort of young man whom Lilian would like. And when he succeeds his uncle, he will be rich, will he not?'

Matthew did not wince. He had been inured to speculations of that kind by many previous speeches of a similar nature, and he only replied,—

'Well, as I have told you, it isn't certain yet that he will succeed his uncle. I haven't a doubt that you will both like him, though, and I will try to arrange a meeting by-and-by. Would you, when you are able to leave the house, care to come and look at my azaleas some day? If so, I might exhibit Jerome at the same time.'

Lady Sara said that would be delightful, while Lilian, on being subsequently informed of the treat in store for her, remarked that there would be no harm in having a fourth person.

'He will do to amuse mamma while you and I poke about the house and the garden,' said she. 'I am dying to see your house. I know it will be charming, like everything else about you.'

Matthew laughed and replied that the house really was charming, although nobody had told him before that everything else about him was.

'But it will be more in accordance with the fitness of things that I should entertain your mother,' he continued. 'You and Jerome will have my full leave to poke about the premises to your heart's content.'

'If you dare to treat me in that way,' the girl returned, quite as much in earnest as in joke, 'I will never forgive you!

I *hate* young men ! They always think it their duty to talk nonsense to young women, even when they could talk sense if they chose. And that isn't always.'

'You won't find them so hateful when you have seen a little more of them,' Matthew observed tranquilly.

Nevertheless, he could not help being glad that Lilian was not consumed with anxiety to meet this particular young man, and he left the house in one of these elated moods to which he had become subject, despite his conviction that there was nothing to be elated about. A more reasonable cause for satisfaction awaited him, on his return home, in the shape of a letter from his brother, who had apparently developed a patronising sort of interest in Spencer Frere, and who wrote to say that very encouraging reports had reached him with reference to that scapegrace. Sir Godfrey had good reason to believe—so he stated—that in six months' time, or possibly even sooner, the wished-for commission would be made out. He thought the young man's friends might be glad to hear this.

One of them, no doubt, would ; and Matthew was a little ashamed of himself when he remembered how long it was since he had held any communication, direct or indirect, with her ; because repeated refusals to dine with her parents could scarcely be counted as even indirect communications with Miss Frere. He had been obliged to decline those invitations, which had included an entreaty that he would spend a part of Christmas Day with his hospitable friends ; his time had been so fully occupied that it had been out of the question for him to eat his meals at regular hours—much more so to eat them in other people's

houses. But the real truth was that he had almost forgotten Anne Frere; and that was why he now took himself to task, wondering what excuse he could trump up to secure a few minutes of private conversation with her.

His good luck and poor Mr Frere's misfortune solved that problem for him nearly as soon as he had began to debate it. A heated groom from Hayes Park brought him a note, adorned and emphasised by many italics, in which Mrs Frere besought him to come to her aid without delay.

'George has got one of his *very* bad fits of gout,' the distressed lady wrote, 'and is literally *roaring* with it! I don't suppose you can do much, for I know by experience that nobody can, but I think it would relieve him a little to swear at you, and I am *sure* you won't mind if he does. I have entreated him to swear at me, but he seems to doubt whether that would be right—which, of course, it wouldn't. Besides, it is just possible, after all, that you may be able to recommend something. So do, *please*, come as soon as you can.'

Matthew responded to this pathetic appeal with all possible despatch; and if he was not actually sworn at by the prostrate sufferer, he was given to understand in so many words that he and all the other members of an honourable profession were no better than a pack of charlatans.

'God bless my soul!' Mr Frere exclaimed, 'I don't want to be told that I must have patience. As if I didn't know that! Why, I'm a monument of patience—an overturned monument

—ask my wife if I ain't! What I want is something to relieve me of this infernal agony, and there isn't one of you who understands his trade well enough to give me what I want. Well, there!—I didn't mean that, my dear Austin; you mustn't mind me. I daresay you understand, at all events, that a man isn't responsible for his language when he is being tortured as I am now.'

'Oh, but we are not quite so incompetent as you make us out,' Matthew answered cheerfully. 'I can promise you relief in a very short time, and when this bout is over—as it soon will be—you will feel all the better for it.'

The terrible ladies who, a few years ago, used to be so fond of grabbing reluctant acquaintances by the wrist and, after a solemn scrutiny of palm and fingers, announcing what his or her proclivities were, professed in a great many instances to have discovered the existence of a 'healing hand.' Perhaps not a large number of the persons to whom this mysterious virtue was ascribed really possessed it; but Matthew Austin ought certainly to have been included in that select band. It was always said of him in his hospital days that his touch seemed to soothe where that of his colleagues necessarily gave pain; and Mr Frere wonderingly admitted as much after the medicated wool, in which his foot was swathed, had been removed and replaced.

'I don't know how on earth you manage it, Austin,' the old gentleman said, 'but you have positively made me easier, instead of hurting me. Even Anne can't do what you did just now without hurting me like the devil, and Anne is the only person in the house who is fit to come near a gouty patient.'

‘Is it she who nurses you?’ Matthew inquired, hoping that, in that case, it would not be long before she made her appearance.

‘She does little things for me ; I’m not quite reduced to the necessity of having a nurse yet,’ answered Mr Frere, who was still rather cross and ready to take offence, though less disposed to execrate the whole race of doctors than he had been a few minutes before. ‘But I must say for Anne that she tries her best with everything that she undertakes. You may have noticed that.’

‘Yes, I have noticed that. She has strong affections, too, I should say.’

‘Oh, all women have strong affections ; the trouble is that they are apt to bestow them unworthily. Anne herself—but I daresay you have heard something, and I don’t care to talk about it. Only I know rather more than she imagines.’

Matthew, thinking that he saw his opportunity, ventured to begin,—

‘If you are alluding to your son—

‘Ah,’ interrupted Mr Frere, speaking in a quiet, decided voice, very unlike that which was habitual to him, ‘I suspected that she had mentioned her brother to you. That is why I introduced the subject. Now, I want you to understand, Austin, once for all, that it’s a forbidden subject. Anne knows that ; but I am afraid she thinks I may be got at in roundabout ways—which is quite a mistake. I have my reasons for acting as I have done, and if you and others set me down as a hard-hearted old brute, I can’t help it. Now, we’ll say no more about the matter, please.’

Thus it is that human nature is wont to turn its back upon itself and perplex the painstaking student. Mr Frere's words were words of wisdom, but really they should not by rights have proceeded out of the mouth of a choleric old gentleman whose head ought to have been as soft as the heart which he had proclaimed his willingness to hear called hard. In any case, Matthew could but bow to his request and say no more. He remained by the bedside as long as there was any excuse for remaining; but since Anne neither showed herself nor was, apparently, expected to do so, he had to take his leave at length.

'I'll swallow your stuff, though I don't suppose it will do me one atom of good,' was Mr Frere's valedictory remark. 'If you come across my daughter on your way out, you might just mention that I haven't been able to read the *Times* yet, because of the infernal crackling that it makes when I try to hold it up to the light.'

As a matter of fact, Matthew did come across one of Mr Frere's daughters before he had advanced very far along the corridor; only, unfortunately, it was not the right one. Maggie bounced out from the ambush where she had been patiently lying in wait, and, catching him by the arm, implored him to come to the schoolroom with her just for five minutes.

'Backfisch is away for her Christmas holidays,' she explained, 'and we have been having a dog-wash. You ought to see them all before they get dirty again. Anne has just finished brushing Snap, and you can't think how funny he looks after he has been brushed!—you won't know his head from his tail. Besides, Anne particularly wants to see you.'

This latter statement may or may not have been true, and was, at all events, quite unauthorised ; but it had the desired effect. Matthew gladly consented to be led off to the school-room, where there was no light save that of a roaring fire, in front of which Anne, on her knees and with her sleeves rolled up above her elbows, was putting the finishing touches to the toilet of Snap, the Skye terrier. Other dogs of various breeds, who had already been subjected to the same painful process of dressing, were grouped round her and were listening, with cocked ears and saturnine amusement, to the snarls and protests of the victim. They all with one consent turned and flew at him on his entrance, while Snap hastened to seek shelter under the nearest bookcase.

‘I ought to apologise for this intrusion,’ Matthew said, as soon as he could make himself heard above the din, and when Maggie, by dint of vigorous flips with a wet towel, had dispersed her excited pack of pets, ‘but I was dragged here by main force, whether I would or not.’

Anne had scrambled to her feet and was hastily pulling down her sleeves. She wore a long, brown-holland apron, her fair hair was disarranged, her cheeks were slightly flushed, and Matthew could not help noticing how handsome she looked, although at that time he had practically no eyes for more than one variety of feminine beauty or more than one possessor of it. But if Anne looked handsome, she certainly did not look as if she particularly wanted to see him, nor was her reply of a nature to bear out her sister’s assertion.

‘Maggie can’t realise that what is a treat to her isn’t necessarily a treat to other people, she said, with an annoyed, con-

strained laugh. 'I am sorry that she has forced you behind the scenes against your will. However—'

'Oh, but indeed it wasn't at all against my will,' interrupted Matthew eagerly, before the discourteous intimation which was evidently upon the tip of Anne's tongue could find articulate expression. 'On the contrary, I was looking out for you to give you a message from your father. I was to say that he can't read the newspaper for himself, on account of the rustling of the leaves, which gets upon his nerves, and—'

'Oh, very well,' answered Anne, interrupting in her turn. 'Thank you for telling me. I will go to him at once ;' and she made straight for the door.

But Matthew could not let her escape him in that way. He hastened after her, pacifying the loudly-protesting Maggie by the promise of a speedy return, and, catching up the fugitive in the passage, said,—

'Please don't run away until I have read you an extract from Godfrey's last letter about your brother. I thought you would like to hear what he says.'

She was, of course, glad to be made acquainted with the hopeful terms of which Sir Godfrey had made use, and she said as much when Matthew had folded up the letter again ; but she spoke so coldly and curtly that he ventured to inquire, with a faint intonation of reproach—

'Is anything the matter? Have I offended you in any way?'

'Oh, dear, no !' she returned, with the same vexed, unmirthful laugh which had jarred upon his ear a few minutes before ; 'how could you have offended me, when I haven't even seen you

for weeks? *Vous tombez mal*—that is all. I am in what Maggie calls one of my beastly moods, and I couldn't be civil to the Queen herself while they last.'

'I am sorry for that,' said Matthew, 'because I suppose a beastly mood means an unsociable mood, and I was just going to beg you to do something sociable.'

'What—again! I should have thought that the striking success that I made of it last time would have convinced you of my hopeless unsociability. Were you about to invite me to meet Lady Sara Murray and her daughter at tea?'

'There is no use in denying that I was,' answered Matthew, with a deprecating laugh. 'I wish you liked them; but as you don't, it can't be helped; and, after all, it was not so much them whom I wanted you to meet as a young fellow named Jerome, whom I have been attending since he smashed himself up a short time ago. I am almost sure you would like him, because I don't see how anybody could help liking him.'

He gave a brief account of Leonard's mishap and of his consequent intimacy with the sufferer, to which Miss Frere listened rather inattentively. She knew quite well who Mr Jerome was, it appeared, but she had as yet had no opportunity of making his personal acquaintance, and she gave much the same reason as Lilian Murray had done for declining that held out to her.

'I don't like young men, and they don't like me,' she said; 'we never by any chance get on together. So please don't think me rude for begging to be excused. I should only be a wet blanket and spoil your party if I joined it. As it is, you

will be four—which is quite the right number, for I hear that you have snatched Lady Sara back from the brink of the grave to act as chaperon a little longer. By the way, I ought to have congratulated you upon that achievement of yours : everybody is talking about it.'

Matthew glanced half-wonderingly, half-resentfully at the speaker ; he had supposed that Anne Frere was above the petty spitefulness which is commonly attributed to all women.

'I don't want to be congratulated in that tone of voice,' he said. 'It *was* an achievement, and I am proud of it ; but I really didn't do what in me lay to keep Lady Sara Murray alive for the purpose that you mention.'

'Did I not tell you that I am incapable of civility to-day ! You had much better go away before I commit some further solecism in good manners ; and I am sure you ought to be grateful to me for resisting the temptation to make a fifth at your tea-party. Probably you are.'

Perhaps he was. At all events, he was more hurt and provoked than a philosopher should have been, and for the moment he felt that he decidedly preferred the society of Maggie and the dogs to that of a young woman who seemed bent upon saying disagreeable things out of sheer perversity.

CHAPTER XIII

LEONARD GIVES HIS OPINION

SOMETIMES, after the turn of the year, and long before the spring, there come to us dwellers in a northern island, of which the rigorous climate is mitigated by that ever-blessed Gulf Stream, a few days so mild and soft and sunshiny that they seem to have been plucked by mistake out of the brief coming summer which is our due. Birds begin to chirp and twitter, windows are thrown open, fires are allowed to burn low and the half-forgotten smell of the moist earth greets our expanded nostrils.

Well, we all know what that means. Presently the wind will work round by north to east, where it will stick for six weeks without a break; the winter is only playing with us; the worst of our miseries are yet to come, and it is ten to one that every man and woman whom we meet in the course of the day will accost us with the same sagacious observation—‘Ah, we shall pay for this later on!’

Such, indeed, was the original and novel remark which Leonard Jerome had just made, one fine afternoon, to his friend and medical adviser, in whose pretty, old-fashioned drawing-room he was lounging at his ease, with one hand in his pocket and his long legs stretched out before him. Of his legs he had

for some time past enjoyed the full use and, although one of his arms was still in a sling, the other had recently been set free. Long confinement to the house had toned down the usual ruddy brownness of his complexion ; but this pallor was not unbecoming, and, taking him altogether, his appearance was of a nature to reflect credit both upon his doctor and upon the friend who was about to exhibit him to a couple of expectant ladies.

‘The future may pretty generally be counted upon to take its revenge on the present,’ Matthew said, in answer to his gloomy forecast. ‘Why not make the best of good times while they last?’

He was thinking of other things besides the weather as he spoke. His good time, he very well knew, was irrevocably destined to be short, and it was not always that he could manage to act upon his own excellent advice. Still, he had at least one small matter for self-congratulation in that neither frost nor rain nor snow had intervened to put a stop to his little tea-party. A less disinterested or a more apprehensive man might not have been in so great a hurry to introduce the handsome and eligible Mr Jerome to the object of his affections ; but Matthew flattered himself that he had no silly illusions. Leonard Jerome or another—what did it matter to him, since it was obvious that a provincial practitioner could never stand in the position of a rival to Lilian’s suitor or suitors?

‘I hope that old Lady Sara of yours won’t expect a one-armed man to trundle her round the garden in her bath-chair,’ Leonard was beginning, when the door was thrown open and the subject of his groundless alarm walked in.

Lady Sara, who was now almost as well as she had been before her dangerous illness, scarcely looked like an invalid. Always well dressed, carrying herself gracefully and retaining, as she did, perceptible vestiges of the beauty for which she had been famous in years gone by, she could hardly fail to produce a favourable impression upon a stranger. But of course it was not upon her that the gaze of this admiring and astonished stranger became instantly riveted. Matthew saw that, and experienced a momentary sensation of pain on witnessing what he saw; but, after all, it was only what he had been fully prepared for and, for that matter, had desired. He would have been much disappointed if Leonard Jerome had not admired Miss Murray. When the necessary introductions had been effected and the inquiries and condolences which the occasion called for had been interchanged, he said briskly,—

‘Now, shall we have tea first and flowers afterwards, or will you come out into the garden at once? I can allow you to choose, Lady Sara, because, on such an afternoon as this, I sha’n’t feel it my duty to pack you off home for an another hour and a half.’

Lady Sara replied that, under those circumstances, she would have her tea.

‘I want to look about me before I do anything else,’ she said. ‘What a dear old room!—and what a number of pretty things you have got! Is that a Bartolozzi?’

She moved away to examine the engraving which had attracted her attention and proceeded to inspect Matthew’s modest stock of treasures, taking her host with her and leaving—perhaps not

altogether without design—the two younger people to entertain one another. The young people, however, did not seem to be particularly eager to fall in with her wishes. Some few observations they must have exchanged, but it was not long before Matthew became aware that Lilian was at his elbow, and, while the tea was being carried in, she took occasion to say to him in an agitated whisper,—

‘Freeze to me!—don’t leave me for a moment! I won’t perambulate the garden for three-quarters of an hour with that masher!’

‘You will like him very much when you have talked a little more to him,’ returned Matthew, in amused and subdued accents; ‘he is as far removed from being a masher as I am. A more manly, unaffected young fellow I never met, and—’

‘Oh, yes,’ interrupted the girl impatiently, ‘I daresay he is all that, and he is right enough with other men, and just now he is wearing his country clothes. But I can see him in a frock-coat and a tall hat, all the same, and I don’t want to be bothered with him. *Please* hand him over to mamma; they are sure to have any number of common acquaintances and they will get on together splendidly.’

It is all very well to assert that the path of duty is not invariably unpleasant and that to do what is distasteful to us is not necessarily to perform a meritorious action, but we are all firmly convinced of the contrary, nor could Matthew doubt that he was bound to disregard this seductive entreaty. His place, beyond all question, was by Lady Sara’s side, and he gallantly claimed it. After tea—which informal repast, somehow or other, afforded

fewer opportunities for the development of informality than might have been hoped for—she accepted the support of his proffered arm, and he led her forth into the cool greenhouse, Leonard and Lilian following closely in the wake of the couple and displaying marked anxiety to be included in the general conversation. It was ridiculous of them to behave in that way; still, so long as they chose to do it, nobody could prevent them, and their entertainer, by reason of the frailty of his mortal nature, was more tickled than provoked with their conduct.

But they could not possibly keep it up. Even if Bush, who was in attendance, had been less long-winded and Lady Sara less ecstatically loquacious, the obstinate silence with which their occasional diffident comments upon a subject about which neither of them knew anything at all were received, must eventually have forced them back upon one another, and their mutual animosity had already undergone some diminution before Lady Sara, after minutely examining the fragrant blooms in the stove-house, announced, with every appearance of regret, that she was too tired to walk round the grounds.

‘I shall go back to the drawing-room and wait for you, while Mr Austin does the honours,’ said she. ‘Don’t think of hurrying; I can make myself quite happy with a book.’

Naturally, Matthew protested that his notion of doing the honours was to remain with his chief guest, adding that ‘the grounds’ were not so extensive as to require a guide; naturally, also, Lilian felt that it would be hardly polite to avow the absolute indifference with which she regarded Mr Austin’s cherished shrubs. So her ladyship carried her point, after all—

a point to which, in truth, she attached scanty importance. Only, as the mother of a marriageable daughter, she felt it incumbent upon her to neglect no chance that might turn up.

‘Your young friend is handsome, but scarcely brilliant,’ she remarked, on her way back towards the house. ‘I should think there was no fear of his being disinherited. Why should anybody wish to disinherit such a nice, gentlemanlike, commonplace sort of person?’

Perhaps that was not quite the light in which Lilian saw Mr Jerome; assuredly it was not the light in which that young man was accustomed to see himself. Anyhow, his first remark to his companion, while they paced, somewhat sullenly, side by side, down one of the gravel paths, could not fairly be stigmatised as commonplace.

‘May I ask,’ he began, ‘whether I have been unfortunate enough to strike you as more objectionable and offensive than the ordinary run of casual acquaintances?’

She thought it decidedly objectionable and offensive on his part to put such a question, but, being as yet unversed in the art of fine innuendo, could hit upon no other rejoinder than the rather bald and curt one of ‘Not at all.’

‘I am glad of that; because I was afraid, from the savage manner in which you have been snubbing me all this time, that I had unintentionally done something that you couldn’t forgive.’

‘That is nonsense,’ returned Lilian impatiently. ‘You are much too well satisfied with yourself to have been afraid of anything of the sort, and if I had really snubbed you, you would

have turned your back upon me at once and begun to talk to my mother. Why didn't you?'

'Ah, now we are getting at it; now one begins to perceive what one's offence has been! Well, really, Miss Murray, it was no fault of mine. I don't want to be rude, but the unvarnished truth is that I would quite as soon have talked to your mother as to you, if only I had been allowed. Dense as I have no doubt you think me, I have intelligence enough to understand that you came here to see our friend Austin, not me.'

'You would indeed have been dense if you had imagined that I came here to see you,' Lilian rejoined, with an angry laugh, for at this period of her life she had not learned to disguise her emotions and did not in the least care how rude she might appear to a young man whom she had rather hastily set down as supercilious and conceited. She went on to say, in a needlessly defiant tone,—'Mr Austin is a very great friend of ours. He saved my mother's life, and he has been kindness itself to us ever since we came here. I don't believe there is anybody else in the world like him.'

'Then we have at least found one subject upon which we are of the same mind,' remarked Leonard good-humouredly, 'for Austin is a very great friend of mine too, and I agree with you in doubting whether there is anybody else in the world quite like him. I can't say that he has saved my life, but that is only because I haven't given him the chance, and as for kindness, I have had as much of that from him as I can carry. Don't you think we might make friends—you and I—upon the strength of our common affection for a third person? It would be more

comfortable if we could, because I suppose we are bound to spend a short time together in examining the third person's outdoor plants. He is sure to catechise us about them when we go in.'

'Very well ; it need not take us long, I should think,' was Lilian's somewhat ungracious response to these overtures.

But, as a matter of fact, their stroll over the two modest acres which were enclosed by Mr Austin's garden-fence did last a good deal longer than one of them was aware of. Leonard Jerome had never earned, nor desired to earn, the odious reputation of a lady-killer ; still, he had all his life been accustomed to be a favourite with the opposite sex, and he was not unnaturally piqued by the disdain with which the beautiful Miss Murray had seen fit to treat him so far. He felt that he owed it to himself to convince her that she was under some misapprehension or other, and in truth the task of putting her into a better humour proved to be no very hard one. He talked so simply, boyishly and pleasantly that she soon had to change her opinion of him ; he did not brag of his prowess in field-sports or his intimate knowledge of smart society, as she had felt certain that he would do ; and if his conversation was a trifle egotistical, it was not the less interesting on that account. There are people who can discourse quite charmingly about themselves—who, in fact, cannot discourse with anything approaching the same charm upon other topics. So Lilian heard the whole—or, at any rate, as much as could be related to her—of Mr Jerome's personal history, was informed that he possessed a place in the far north where he supposed he would have to take up his residence some fine day, learnt that he was not nearly as well off as he would

like to be, and was candidly told that he based great hopes, not unmingled with misgivings, upon the provisions of his uncle's will.

'The worst of it is,' said he, 'that one never knows what to be at with Uncle Richard. Sometimes he growls at me for not being in Parliament or making some other good use of what he is pleased to call my talents, and then, when I least expect it, he'll turn round upon me and abuse me for spending a couple of months in London when I might have been leading a healthy life in the country. It takes more patience than I can boast of to put up with him. However, we have got on rather better together of late, thanks to dear old Austin, who stands between us and strokes us both down. Austin has quite won my uncle's heart.'

'I don't wonder at that,' remarked Lilian.

'I expect you would wonder a little if you knew Uncle Richard. I am not surprised at Austin's winning any quantity of other hearts, though.'

Leonard concluded his sentence with a sigh, to which Miss Murray took instant exception.

'Oh, if you mean that he is lucky to be so popular, you understand very little about it,' said she. 'You can have the same luck and the same popularity whenever you like. All you have to do is to be as good and kind and unselfish as he is.'

'That is all, is it? Then, luckless and unpopular I shall remain to the end of my days, I am afraid. The only consolation is that nine-tenths of the human race must be in the same boat with me. Even you yourself, perhaps.'

‘Oh, I don’t pretend to be anything but thoroughly selfish, and I don’t think I particularly care about being popular,’ answered the girl. ‘Hadn’t we better go in now?’

A quarter of an hour later Matthew was walking across the fields towards Wilverton Grange with his young friend, whom he had undertaken to see part of the way home. Lady Sara, laden with the flowers which Bush, in obedience to orders, had reluctantly cut for her, had been wheeled away in her bath-chair, after taking a very cordial leave of her entertainer and her fellow-guest. She had begged the latter to call upon her any afternoon when he should have nothing better to do, and he had accepted the invitation with eager alacrity. Just now he was eulogising Miss Murray’s beauty in unmeasured terms.

‘The most beautiful girl I have ever seen in all my life, bar none!’ he declared emphatically.

‘Ah, I was pretty sure that you would think so,’ Matthew observed, with a laugh which did not sound altogether merry.

‘Well, *you* think so too, don’t you?’

‘Oh, yes; I think so too.’

‘Mind you, I don’t say she is quite the nicest girl I have ever met; though she may even be that to other people, for anything that I know to the contrary. But not to me. Oh, no, she took very good care not to be nice to me—which was rather unkind of her, considering what a lot of trouble I took to be nice to her. Was I to blame for not being Matthew Austin, M.D., or for having been ordered by Matthew Austin, M.D., to perambulate a damp garden with her, when I would much sooner have been sitting before the fire?’

‘I am not entitled to write M.D. after my name, and you are not entitled to shirk the duties that belong to your age,’ Matthew answered. ‘Not that I believe for one moment that you wished to shirk them. Was it for Lady Sara’s sake that you jumped with such avidity at her permission to you to call in Prospect Place?’

‘I am sorry, my dear Austin,’ said the younger man, ‘to notice in you a tendency towards humbug, which I had imagined to be foreign to your character. I trust it is only humbug. I trust it isn’t the jealousy which it pretends to be. Because, if it were, I should have to write you down not as an M.D. but as a D.D. ass.’

‘Jealousy !—at my age !’

‘Oh, that puts the matter beyond a doubt; if you weren’t a horrid old humbug you wouldn’t begin to talk about your age. Why, what are you?—five-and-thirty?’

‘Not quite so much; but I daresay I look more, and I know I often feel more. Anyhow, I am centuries older than Miss Murray; added to which, I am her mother’s physician and a mere nobody in point of rank. By all means call me an ass, if you like; but please acquit me of having been such an ass as to fix my provincial and medical affections upon a young lady who is not unlikely to figure as one of the fashionable beauties of the coming London season.’

Leonard did not reply at once; the two men were just then walking in single file through a copse, traversed by a narrow footpath. But when they emerged into a pasture, he laid his one available hand upon Matthew’s shoulder and said,—

‘Now, look here, old chap; we’ve been pretty good friends, haven’t we?—and I don’t see the use of making mysteries. Of course I don’t want you to tell me anything that you would prefer to keep to yourself; only, you know, you did virtually tell me everything some time ago.’

‘I told you everything? I don’t know what you mean!’ ejaculated Matthew, in honest bewilderment.

‘Why, my dear man, you weren’t under the impression that you hadn’t betrayed yourself a hundred times, were you? I didn’t respond as I might have done, because I wanted to have a look at the young woman first. Well, I have had a look at her now, and I congratulate you. Rubbish about your age and your rank! You are every bit as good as she is in one sense, and a great deal better in another. Her mother, I grant you, may not be of that opinion just at first; but what then? It will be all right, so long as you don’t insist upon depreciating yourself to them. It’s a mistake to depreciate yourself, and a man of your wisdom ought to know it.’

Matthew was so taken aback that it was some minutes before he recovered full possession of his faculties. By the time that he had done so he could no longer dispute the accuracy of Leonard Jerome’s conjectures; but he gave many good reasons—of which the young man made light—for his determination to keep his secret to himself, so far as Lilian and her mother were concerned.

‘And, after all,’ he concluded, ‘there is such a thing as absolutely disinterested love. It is possible—’

‘Oh, no, it isn’t,’ interrupted the other. ‘You will never get me to believe that; and when you say such things you almost make me doubt whether you are really in love with the girl at all.’

‘You needn’t doubt that. There is no more doubt about my being in love with her than there is about the impossibility of her ever falling in love with me.’

‘Austin, you exasperate me. I don’t want you to walk any farther with me this evening, thanks; I would rather you went back home and considered your ways. If you don’t know that Miss Murray simply adores you, all I can say is you ought to know it. But I expect you do, and you are only trying to find out what she said to me about you in the garden. You’re a lucky devil; though I’m not going to deny that you deserve your luck. Now good-night—and be hanged to you!’

With that, he turned away and, breaking into a trot, was soon lost to sight in the falling darkness.

‘I daresay,’ muttered Matthew to himself, as he stroked his short beard meditatively, ‘that, from his point of view, I did seem to be insincere. But of course he wouldn’t understand.’

CHAPTER XIV

A GRACEFUL RETREAT

IT is possible that when an attack of gout declines to yield to treatment (as it almost invariably does), something may be done towards hastening the sufferer's recovery by means of cheerful conversation and sanguine assurances. Such, at all events, were the remedies employed by Matthew in the case of Mr Frere, whose enemy released him a full week earlier than usual and who not unnaturally ascribed to one species of dexterity what was more probably due to another.

'That fellow,' he told his wife confidentially, 'ought to be at the head of his profession. He has no business to bury himself down here—though I'm sure *I* don't want him to leave us. It's true that there is plenty of money to be made in Wilverton, and he ought to grow rich as soon as he has cut old Jennings out—which he is bound to do, sooner or later, whether he wishes it or not. People can't be expected to put up with incompetency out of a sentimental regard for vested interests. Oh, don't throw Litton at my head! Litton, I know, sticks to Jennings, in spite of all that Austin has done for that nephew of his; but then Litton hasn't had the gout yet.'

Mrs Frere felt no special interest in Mr Litton—a surly

old curmudgeon with whom it was impossible to maintain neighbourly relations—but her curiosity had been slightly excited with regard to his nephew ever since somebody had told her that that young man had twice been seen to emerge from Lady Sara Murray's door.

‘So the Murrays are friends of your friend the broken-boned bicycle-rider, I hear,’ she took an early opportunity of remarking to Matthew. ‘Where did they fall in with him?—in London?’

‘No; they met him for the first time at my house,’ Matthew answered. ‘I thought it would be a kindness both to them and to Jerome to bring them together, and I wanted Miss Frere to come the same day. However, she wouldn't; she says she dislikes young men.’

‘Poor, dear Anne! Yes; I am afraid it is only too true that she does *not* like young men, and I live in constant dread of her coming to announce to me that she has accepted an elderly widower, with a large family and a small income. That is just the sort of dreadful thing that Anne would delight in doing, if she got the chance. One can't be thankful enough that all the poverty-stricken paterfamilias hereabouts are blessed with exceptionally robust wives. But wasn't it a little bit imprudent of you to take the responsibility of presenting a more or less interesting youth to that lovely girl?’

‘I don't think so. She will have to meet a number of more or less interesting youths before long, you see.’

‘Yes; but taking them in the lump is quite another affair, and if anything were to happen her mother would be sure to

lay the blame on you. Because, although young Jerome has expectations, he is no great catch as he stands. I think, if I had been you, I should have left it alone.'

'You are the last person whom I should have suspected of being so worldly and wary,' Matthew said, laughing.

'Ah, I'm like David Copperfield's landlady, "I'm a mother myself." When it comes to be a question of daughters and marriages we are all apt to be worldly; we can't very well help it. Let us hope that Lady Sara is sufficiently so for the purpose.'

From what Matthew knew of Lady Sara Murray, he thought it probable that her worldliness would prove equal to the occasion; but he did not know as much as Mrs Frere did about her recent relations with young Jerome, stress of work having prevented him from visiting Prospect Place since the occurrence of the episodes recorded in the last chapter. Leonard's words had made a certain impression upon him, and of course he had thought a good deal about them; but his common sense had preserved him from taking them too literally. It was easy to understand how the misapprehension had arisen—easy to conjecture that Lilian had made use of more emphatic language in speaking of a man whom she liked than she would have done in speaking of a man whom she loved, and it was not surprising that a young fellow who was doing his best to be agreeable to her should have been spurred by vexation towards erroneous conclusions. If there was one thing of which Matthew was more persuaded than another, it was that he might with perfect safety to himself and others keep up his pleasant intimacy with Lady Sara and her daughter; and, as he had a spare half-hour

that afternoon, he drove straight from Hayes Park to their temporary residence.

He was received by Lilian alone—her mother, as she presently explained, having gone to lie down—and, for all his common sense, he could not but rejoice a little when she upbraided him for having absented himself so long.

‘How horrid you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘Every day I have been thinking that you *must* come at last, and four times have I seen you drive past the door without even turning your head! Is it that you don’t care to see us except when we are at the point of death?’

‘No; it isn’t that,’ answered Matthew simply, ‘but the number of my patients keeps on increasing, and lately I have had to devote all my little free time to cheering up poor old Mr Frere, who has had the gout and has been very sorry for himself.’

‘Bother old Mr Frere and his gout! Though I like you all the better for being so kind to everybody—even to gouty old gentlemen. Do you know what your friend Mr Jerome says about you? He declares that you have been neglecting us on purpose, lest we should hold the honour of your friendship too cheap.’

‘My friend Mr Jerome says a good many silly things. You have seen him, then?’

The girl made a grimace.

‘Oh, yes,’ she answered, ‘he has contrived to find one excuse or another for dropping in almost every day since we first met. I have heard a great deal about him, too—both from himself and

from mamma's friend, Mrs Brudenell, who often comes across him in London, it seems. Evidently he is very much sought after and is fully aware of his own value. He doesn't adopt your system of impressing it upon others, though.'

'Ah, you are prejudiced ; you made up your mind to dislike him from the first.'

'No ; I like him well enough ; only, as I told you, I am not fond of fashionable and conceited young men. One can never feel at one's ease with them and one is always offending their vanity. However, I will say for Mr Jerome that he has one redeeming point—he thoroughly appreciates you.'

'Does he? Well, I think I appreciate him too. Fashionable he may be, but I don't believe he is conceited, and as for his being young—all I can say is I wish I had half his complaint !'

'Do try to break yourself of talking like that !' exclaimed Lilian, with an impatient gesture ; 'you will be young for another ten years at least, and what is the use of making yourself out old before your time? You go on repeating it until people end by taking you at your word. Even mamma speaks as if you were somewhere about her own age, whereas in reality you are just about mine. Men are always ten years younger than women.'

Matthew, resolved to adhere to the prudent and unromantic course which he had marked out for himself, was in the act of asserting that middle age overtakes many a man who has not yet entered upon his thirty-second year, when he was interrupted by the entrance of indisputable youth in the person of Mr Leonard Jerome. Lilian, after giving utterance to an exclamation of annoyance which was perfectly audible, and was doubtless in-

tended to be so, called out to the retreating housemaid,—‘Tell Lady Sara, please’—while the intruder, having shaken hands with her, turned to Matthew and said,—

‘I saw your cart at the door, old man ; so I thought I would come in.’

‘What a very odd reason!’ remarked Miss Murray. ‘Most people, when they see a doctor’s carriage at the door, stay outside.’

‘I apologise,’ answered the young man, with an assumption of good humour which was not altogether effectual in masking his chagrin ; ‘I quite understand that I am *de trop* ; but the beauty of me is that I shall not be *de trop* much longer. I am off to London to-morrow, Miss Murray, you will be glad to hear, and as I rather want Austin to have a look at my arm before I go, I took the opportunity of killing two birds with one stone by catching him and wishing you good-bye at the same time.’

Lilian made no response ; but Matthew exclaimed, in unaffected concern,—

‘My dear fellow, this is very sudden ! You haven’t been quarrelling with your uncle, I hope?’

‘Not more than usual ; but it is really time for me to be moving on. Can I execute any commissions for you in town, Miss Murray?’

Lady Sara, who entered the room before Lilian could answer, echoed this query in accents of polite regret.

‘In town? I hope that doesn’t mean that you are thinking of deserting us, Mr Jerome.’

‘It’s awfully nice of you to put it in that way, Lady Sara,’ the young man made reply, ‘but I’m afraid I can’t flatter myself that my friends here will miss me half as much as I shall miss them. As for my uncle, he has been dead sick of me for a long time past, and it’s better to end a visit of one’s own accord than to wait until one is told at what hour the train leaves the next morning—don’t you think so?’

Lady Sara smiled. She was not particularly eager to arrange an alliance between her daughter—who might do so very much better—and the potential heir of a well-to-do country gentleman, although she had not felt justified in discouraging what had appeared to her to be advances on Leonard’s part.

‘I daresay you are longing to get away from this dull place,’ she remarked. ‘Of course it must be dreadfully dull for you in your disabled state, and when a man can neither hunt nor shoot, he is better off in London than anywhere else, no doubt.’

Some talk upon this not very novel topic of discussion ensued. Lilian took no share in it, and at the end of five minutes or so Leonard rose.

‘Have you time to drive me to the Grange and make a last examination of me, Austin?’ he asked. ‘I was on my way to your house, and I meant to leave a note for you if I didn’t find you at home.’

‘Come along,’ answered Matthew, after consulting his notebook; ‘I can just manage it, if we start at once.’

‘How tiresome it is of you!’ Lilian ejaculated in an undertone, while Lady Sara was telling Mr Jerome that she quite hoped to meet him again later in the year and in livelier scenes;

‘he can’t really want you to look at his arm, and I’m sure you can’t want to see it! Now it will be weeks, I suppose, before you deign to honour us with another call.’

‘I should be here every day, if I could consult my own inclinations,’ Matthew answered, with absolute truth. ‘And I certainly could not think of letting Jerome escape from my hands without a final overhauling. He is not by any means well yet, whatever he may say. Why he should be in such a desperate hurry to get away all of a sudden I can’t make out.’

Lilian shrugged her shoulders. She meant to imply that she was equally ignorant and indifferent as to Mr Jerome’s motives; but she may not improbably have formed some surmise upon the subject, and it is hardly necessary to add that a somewhat similar conjecture had suggested itself to Matthew’s mind.

However, nothing in the semblance of a confession was forthcoming from Leonard during the rapid drive through the twilight that ensued. The young man was in high spirits and very loquacious. He said he presumed there was no reason why he should not get on a horse now, and, although he might not be able to follow the hounds, he might go to the meets, potter about the roads and lanes and see a little of the sport in a country that he knew. If that should prove impracticable, he would manage to amuse himself somehow or other in the metropolis.

‘At least one will be amongst one’s friends there,’ he remarked, ‘and there’s always something to be done when one is in touch with civilisation. You aren’t a native, so I don’t mind telling you that I would sooner be shot at once than spend the rest of my days at Wilverton.’

‘It is a matter of taste,’ said Matthew. ‘Personally, I like the place, and I am quite contented here. So would you be, I daresay, if you were in a fit state for field sports. By the way, it would have been prettier on your part to remember that you are leaving at least one friend behind you.’

‘My dear old chap, you don’t suppose I forget that, do you? But, as I say, you’re not a native, and of course you won’t stay here much longer. You are thrown away in a stupid, provincial watering-place; besides which, Mrs Austin won’t stand it. I am willing to lay a trifle of odds that, in eighteen months or two years’ time at the outside, I shall be doing myself the honour to call at some house in Brook Street or Grosvenor Street which will have your name inscribed upon a brass plate on the door.’

‘The brass plate and the house in Mayfair stand upon much the same plane of probability as the Mrs Austin, no doubt. No; you will find me here, jogging along just as usual, the next time that Mr Litton sends for you; but I hope that will not be as much as eighteen months hence.’

Leonard only laughed and gave another turn to his companion’s thoughts by beginning to talk about his symptoms. The fact was that his injuries had not been limited to a couple of broken bones, so that there was some need for the careful examination of him which Matthew made after they had reached the Grange. At the end of it his friend and physician impressed upon him that for some time to come he would have to keep quiet and avoid making any demand upon forces which were not yet at his disposal.

‘If you exercise common prudence, you will be as well as ever before the summer; but if you don’t, we may have you upon your back for an indefinite length of time. Mind that. I only wish you would remain where you are for another week or two; you can’t very well get into mischief here.’

‘Can’t I, though! If I know anything of myself, I am one of those people who can get into mischief anywhere, and the devil will have fewer chances of finding work for my idle hands in London than he would here. Oh, I’ll be as prudent as you please; I don’t want to be an invalid, I assure you! Drop me a line sometimes, will you, like a good fellow? I’m not going to keep you any longer now, because I know you’re dying to be off.’

Matthew did not stir. He stood for a few moments gazing at the other, with a smile which was half-amused, half-embarrassed and wholly affectionate. He had in truth become very fond of his muscular young patient, whom he believed—mistakenly, perhaps—that he could read like a book.

‘Jerome,’ he said at length, ‘we are not going to part like this; it’s absurd. You know well enough that when you asked me to drive you home, it wasn’t about your physical condition that you wanted to speak to me.’

‘Good Lord, man! do you imagine that I feel uneasy about my mental condition?’

‘That’s just what I do imagine; and it doesn’t require a very vivid imagination to guess why you are taking to your heels so abruptly either. I think you meant to tell me, in case I shouldn’t guess, why you had determined to beat a retreat, and then your courage failed you, or else, perhaps, you came to the

conclusion that it would be better to hold your tongue. My dear fellow, you needn't hold your tongue, and you needn't take to your heels. There is nothing at all to be ashamed of in what has happened to you. Nobody knows better than I do that falling in love is an involuntary process, and although I thoroughly appreciate your chivalrous scruples, they are misplaced in this instance, believe me. If you and I stood in any sense upon an equal footing, the case might be different; but since we don't, you can inflict no injury upon me by staying here and allowing things to follow their natural course. I have no sort of right to propose to Miss Murray, nor have I the remotest intention of ever doing so.'

Leonard burst into uproarious laughter.

'So that was what you thought I wanted to tell you! You make me out a nice, modest sort of fellow, I must say! So generous of me to retire, rather than cut out a friend who, of course, wouldn't have had the ghost of a chance against me if I had chosen to stand to my guns! I wonder whether it is possible to persuade you that seeing Miss Murray isn't of necessity loving her. Perhaps not; but I daresay you will believe me when I declare, upon my honour, that it never entered into my head to make the extraordinary statement that you seemed to have expected. I did think of saying something to you about Miss Murray; but it amounted to no more than what I said the other day, and why weaken truth by repetition?'

'You don't convince me,' Matthew remarked.

'Ask her herself, then; she will soon remove all shadow of doubt from your mind.'

‘That is not what I mean. I mean that you haven’t yet convinced me of error as to your own case.’

‘Oh, well, put it as you please, then,’ returned Leonard, with a touch of petulance. ‘Let us say, if you like, that I am a little bit smitten with your fair friend, and that I think it just as well to lose no more time in turning my back upon her perpetually upturned nose. Even if it were so, there would be no occasion for heroics. I am not like you; I am in a chronic state of being a little bit smitten with somebody, and I can’t remember a single instance in which I haven’t been cured at once by change of air. Moreover, I am not a marrying man—and don’t mean to be until I meet the lovely and accomplished heiress for whom I am always on the look-out.’

There was nothing more to be got out of him, nor could Matthew, who was in a hurry, prosecute investigations at much greater length. The two men parted with mutual expressions of friendship and goodwill; but one of them felt sure that the other had not been entirely candid with him—for which he was sorry.

CHAPTER XV

COMMON SENSE BREAKS DOWN

IT is proverbially perilous to play with fire; yet pyrotechnic displays are the commonest of diversions, and are not supposed to endanger the lives of skilled operators. If only you keep cool and understand what you are about, your fireworks may dim the firmament without exposing you to any greater degree of risk than is inseparable from existence. So Matthew Austin, having a perfectly clear comprehension of what he was doing, and being in no fear—or scarcely any—of losing his self-control, had a pleasant time of it while the days grew longer and the pale sun stronger and winter began grudgingly to make way for spring.

There were moments when he was fain to laugh at himself—for never, surely, had a man been in love in such a queer, contented, hopeless fashion before, and it seemed clean against nature that he should enjoy the position—but he had very little time for introspection, nor did he often care to indulge in it. Wisely or foolishly, he had determined to make the most of what he felt sure would prove to have been the happiest days of his life, and by making the most of them he merely meant seeing as much as he could of Lilian Murray. To see her, to watch her, to hear her talk was enough—had to be enough,

since it was out of the question for him to betray his love by word or look.

Now, it was not because he had undertaken an obviously impossible task that Matthew sometimes laughed at himself; on the contrary, he considered it well within his powers to go on as he was doing without letting anybody guess his secret, and, as a matter of fact, Lady Sara remained in happy ignorance of it. As for that curious, crabbed specimen of humanity, Mr Litton, his conjectures could not, of course, be the result of personal observation, so that Matthew was neither startled nor vexed when the old fellow said abruptly to him, one day,—

‘I suppose there is no use in my speaking, but I wish, for your sake, that those Murrays would leave the place! Mark my words, you will live to regret it if matters advance any farther between you and the girl.’

A friendship had sprung up between the recluse of Wilverton Grange and the young doctor, which had its origin chiefly in a common love of philosophic literature. The former, whose suspicious temperament had at first set him on his guard against admitting a fresh physician to his intimacy, had taken a great fancy to Matthew, after satisfying himself that the latter had no design for supplanting Dr Jennings, while Matthew, on his side, liked Mr Litton’s library very much and its owner pretty well.

‘Leonard has been talking nonsense to you,’ he replied tranquilly. ‘I have no regrets, and I am in no danger of earning any.’

‘Oh, so you say!—you can’t say anything else, I suppose.

Go your own way, then, and get yourself into trouble like the rest of the world. If women could but be clean abolished, there would be no occasion to cheer people up by holding out hopes of a future state of bliss to them. Only then, to be sure, we should be even less willing to die than we are already.'

Matthew wrote to Leonard Jerome to reproach him for his indiscretion, and received a prompt disclaimer in reply from the young man, who added—

'You have no idea what a sharp old file that uncle of mine is. He knows all manner of things that he has not any business to know; though I will say for him that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, he keeps his mouth closed. For the rest, you really mustn't expect your neighbours to be stone-blind—or dumb either. Give them something to talk about, my dear old man; it will be a charity to them and a relief to others besides yourself. For my own part, I can't see what on earth you are waiting for.'

Not for encouragement, at all events, Lilian having given him as much of that as she could have done if he had been a fit and proper person to become her husband, and if, to use Leonard's absurd phrase, she had 'adored' him. But he was not misled by flattering and affectionate expressions which, he felt sure, would never have been uttered, had not the speaker been wholly fancy-free, nor was he in the least afraid of breaking Miss Murray's heart. That allusion to the perspicacity of his neighbours did, however, cause him some passing disquietude; for it was true enough that in country towns people begin to chatter upon very slight provocation, and he had no business to give the Wilvertonians an excuse for coupling his name with

that of his patient's daughter. Accordingly, he gave Prospect Place a wide berth until he was questioned and upbraided, when he resumed his interrupted visits. The truth was that he had never been accustomed to trouble himself about what might be said behind his back, and it was difficult for him to bear in mind always that young ladies cannot afford to be equally indifferent.

Thus the days and weeks slipped rapidly away until the hedgerows were green and the glory of the tulips and hyacinths in Matthew's garden was already a thing of the past. It was on a day mild and sunny enough to have done no discredit to the average month of June that our hero, unsuspecting of an impending crisis in his life, betook himself to Hayes Park in fulfilment of an engagement to lunch with his friends there and meet the Murrays. Owing to one cause and another, he had seen little of Hayes Park and its denizens for some time past, while Anne had become almost a stranger to him. Of her brother he had heard nothing, or he would have made a point of placing himself in communication with her; but he was inclined to think that no news from that quarter might be regarded as good news, and if he had not tried to meet Miss Frere, she had certainly made no effort to meet him. It was, therefore, an entirely superfluous proceeding on his part to enter into apologetic explanations as he shook hands with her, and so she hastened to assure him.

'You aren't expected to drive about the country, paying calls,' said she. 'Of course we all understand that your work takes up the whole of your time.'

‘Well, almost the whole,’ Matthew answered, guiltily conscious of many spare hours spent in Prospect Place. ‘I am not quite so busy as I was, though, otherwise I couldn’t have given myself the pleasure of coming here to-day. People are beginning to leave, you see.’

‘Yes; isn’t it too tiresome of them!’ chimed in Mrs Frere, who had caught his last words. ‘One sets the example and all the others become infected immediately—that is always the way, and nobody pities us, poor things, who are left to vegetate in solitude for six months! Although I must own I think you are right,’ she added, turning to Lady Sara who was seated beside her; ‘a girl’s first season ought always to be a long one, if possible.’

‘Oh, I don’t know whether we shall be able to see the season out,’ Lady Sara answered; ‘that must depend upon circumstances. But this invitation from our cousins to stay with them until we could find a house for ourselves seemed like an opportunity which it would be a pity to lose. Personally, I shall be sorry to leave Wilverton; the waters and Mr Austin—especially Mr Austin—have done such wonders for me.’

Mr Austin, at that moment, looked very much as if his patient had returned the compliment by producing a wonderful effect upon him. Although he was well aware that Lady Sara Murray intended to spend the coming season in London; although he knew that the time of her departure could not be now far distant, and although he was conscious of the scrutiny of half-a-dozen pairs of eyes, he was unable to prevent the consternation with which he had been filled by this abrupt announcement from showing itself in his face. However, if he

could not command his expression, he retained sufficient control over his voice to say cheerfully,—

‘Are you about to desert us, then, Lady Sara?’

‘Alas! we are. The letter only came yesterday, and I didn’t see you, to consult you, before answering it. Besides, to tell you the truth, I am afraid I should have had to disobey you, even if you had ordered me to stay here a little longer. On Lilian’s account, I felt that it would be madness to refuse such an offer. It *does* make a difference, you see, to be launched from a good house, where there are constant entertainments going on.’

‘No doubt it does,’ Matthew agreed, ‘and you might have consulted me without any misgivings. The waters and I have done all that we can do for you. In fact I believe you will be all the better for a change.’

‘Oh, everybody is the better for a change,’ said Mr Frere, ‘we all want it now and then. Some of us can’t get what we want, though, in this wicked world—can’t even get our food until twenty minutes past the proper time!’

He rang the bell noisily just as the butler threw the door open, and Mrs Frere, taking Lady Sara by the arm, led her out. Lilian, as she passed Matthew, threw him a quick glance, the meaning of which he was at a loss to interpret. It had the appearance of being reproachful, and yet he did not see what he had done to merit reproach. He might perhaps have interrogated her, had he been placed next to her at the luncheon table, but such was not his privilege. Seated between Mrs Frere and Maggie, he had enough to do to keep conversational

step with his neighbours, and although he scarcely knew what either of them was talking about, it was necessary to make continual response to the younger, who had no notion of allowing her valuable remarks to fall upon inattentive ears. From the opposite side of the table, Anne contributed an occasional observation, while Mr Frere entertained Lady Sara with a prolonged jeremiad upon the decay of agriculture, and Dick, home for the Easter holidays, made precocious advances to Lilian, whose beauty had evidently produced a profound impression upon his youthful heart. What would have irritated Matthew, if he had been an irritable person, was the persistent reiteration with which Maggie addressed him by his *sobriquet* of 'the medicine-man,' and the comments thereupon which Mrs Frere's kindness induced her to make. 'Physician, heal thyself!' he was thinking. 'I have common sense enough to prescribe common-sense measures to other people, but I am too great an imbecile to smother my own folly, or even conceal it. Everybody must have seen how dismayed I was.'

The worst of it was that this consciousness of having already made an exhibition of himself prevented him from recovering his natural manner. He knew that he was answering at cross-purposes, he knew that his laughter was palpably forced, he saw that Mrs Frere was looking at him curiously and compassionately; so the only thing to be done seemed to be to get away as soon as possible.

Now, it was not likely that, on so fine an afternoon, Mrs Frere would suffer her guests to depart without having shown them her daffodils, nor could one of them, when specially

invited to accompany her to the lower garden for that purpose, find it in his heart to plead an engagement elsewhere. As soon as luncheon was over, therefore, Matthew was led out into the open air by his hostess, Mr Frere following with Lady Sara, and Lilian, to whom the two young ones had attached themselves, bringing up the rear. Anne had disappeared. Perhaps she had come to the conclusion that nobody wanted her, and perhaps she had not been very far wrong in so concluding.

‘Ah, well,’ Mrs Frere said with one of her placid, comfortable sighs, ‘one is sorry when nice people go away; still, it is often better, for some reasons, that they should go. And one soon forgets them.’

‘I daresay one does,’ answered Matthew.

‘Eh? Oh, yes, everybody soon forgets—especially you, with your work and all your other interests in life. As for me, I haven’t much nowadays except the garden; but the garden suffices to drive my troubles away from my mind for several good hours out of every day, and then I always think it is such a mistake to go on mourning over things that can’t be helped. If I could only persuade George to feel as I do, I am sure he wouldn’t have the gout nearly as often as he does.’

That was probably quite true; and if our philosophy were not apt to serve us the shabby turn of deserting us just when it is most required, we should be a much more cheerful race than we are. The discomfited philosopher who was gazing at Mrs Frere’s daffodils with abstracted eyes could only acknowledge the justice of her remarks, and was not ungrateful to her for her well-meant attempt at consolation, though he was not dis-

posed to pursue the subject farther. Happily, Mrs Frere had an endless store of other topics, equally interesting to her, to dilate upon; and so the inspection of out-door and in-door plants went on, without any more embarrassing allusions, until Lady Sara's fly was seen approaching across the park.

'Can we give you a lift?' her ladyship asked, turning to Matthew, 'or must you rush off somewhere now? If so, perhaps you could look in upon us later in the day.'

Matthew hesitated. He was not obliged to rush off anywhere, and of course he would have to look in upon Lady Sara before long, but he did not quite relish the prospect of the suggested drive. He wanted to be alone for an hour and administer to himself the sharp castigation that he deserved.

'I was thinking of walking back,' he began.

'Oh, then, let me walk with you,' interrupted Lilian eagerly; 'there is plenty of time, and I do so hate driving in a shut fly!'

It was the first time that she had spoken to him directly that day. Her eyes expressed a command rather than an entreaty, which was half painful, half pleasurable to him. 'She, at any rate, doesn't suspect,' he thought. With smiling alacrity he said what nobody could have helped saying in answer to such a speech, and Lady Sara's consent was readily given. Evidently Mr Austin was regarded in the light of one of those safe, elderly gentlemen whose society calls for no chaperonage.

A gallant but indiscreet offer on Dick's part to accompany the pair was declined by Lilian with such uncompromising bluntness that the boy fell back in manifest and crestfallen

indignation, upon which, no doubt, he was subsequently chaffed without mercy by his younger sister ; and so it presently came to pass that Matthew and the girl whom he loved were pacing, side by side, across the grass, with nobody to overhear or interrupt them.

‘Isn’t it horrid !’ Lilian burst out suddenly.

‘I don’t know,’ answered Matthew. ‘A good many things are horrid, but not the weather or the landscape or the present moment. At least, not to me.’

‘You understand quite well what I mean—our going off to London like this. I thought we should have been here for another month or six weeks, and so did mamma until these people sent us their tiresome, officious invitation.’

‘You are really sorry to leave these parts, then?’

‘Does that strike you as so very wonderful? Do you think I am going to enjoy myself, or that I shall make any new friends like those whom I am leaving behind me? But as *you* don’t care, you are naturally surprised that I should.’

‘I never said that I didn’t care.’

‘No ; you only show plainly by your manner that you don’t.’

Matthew, who was under the impression that his manner had given unmistakable evidence to the contrary, was very nearly rejoining, ‘I am glad you think so.’ But that would have been inexcusable ; so he kept silence for a few seconds, in order to make sure that he had himself well in hand ; after which he remarked in a cheerful, friendly tone of voice,—

‘I assure you that your departure will be a very great loss to

me ; I shall miss you and Lady Sara long after you have both ceased to think about your country doctor. But it was in the nature of things that you should return to your own world, while I remained in mine. Besides, whatever you may think, you are really going to enjoy yourself and make plenty of fresh friends. Those whom you leave behind you are well aware of that ; and they would be selfish sort of friends if they wished to retard you from fulfilling your destiny.'

Lilian vouchsafed no reply to these eminently sensible and fitting observations. They had reached a small copse, through the pale green branches of which the sun's rays fell aslant upon a carpet of spring wildflowers, and at every other step she bent down to gather primoses and blue-bells.

'Do you know,' she asked abruptly at length, 'what those children were talking about to me after luncheon?'

'They were very amusing, I have no doubt.'

'They were so amusing that I longed to knock their heads together. I always knew that you had a great admiration for that cold, immaculate Miss Frere, but never—no, never!—should I have believed that you were actually thinking of marrying her. How you will regret it when it is too late!'

'Indeed I shall do no such thing—and for excellent reasons. You are altogether wrong. I don't call Miss Frere cold. I doubt whether she is more immaculate than other people, and most certainly I am not thinking of marrying her.'

'Well, *they* think you will, anyhow. They are quite eager for the match ; they are sure their sister will be graciously pleased to accept you ; they have arranged everything—'

‘Oh, what does it matter what a couple of children have arranged?’ interrupted Matthew impatiently. ‘It is all nonsense from beginning to end.’

Lilian raised her eyes to his, with a doubting glance.

‘I think it is true,’ she said. ‘Why do you look so guilty? Yes, I know it is true!’

Even then he might have held out, if the eyes which were anxiously interrogating his own had not been liquid, beyond all doubt or question, with gathering tears; but that sight was more than he could stand—perhaps it was more than any man could have stood. Away went wisdom, prudence and conscientiousness; he had clasped her hand before he well knew what he was about, and was exclaiming,—

‘Oh, no, you don’t—you know what the real truth is—you know that I shall never marry anyone, since it is utterly, ridiculously impossible that I should ever marry you!’

Whether, during the next five minutes or so, Lilian convinced him that no sort of impossibility was involved in the matter is uncertain—shortly afterwards Matthew was of opinion that she had not so convinced him—but that she really and truly loved him he could not do otherwise than believe, and such a discovery was enough to drive all other thoughts from his mind for the time being. There are a few, always brief, moments in life when we find out what happiness means, and it would be a thousand pities to shorten them, even if we could, by reflections which are quite sure to present themselves with all necessary rapidity. Perhaps rather more than five minutes had elapsed before Matthew descended from the seventh heaven to

the surface of the prosaic planet which we inhabit, and said decisively,—

‘At all events, I must not dream of binding you. Your mother will have every right to accuse me of dishonourable conduct, as it is.’

‘Will she?’ asked the girl, who was clinging to his arm and looking up into his face with mingled triumph and humility. ‘I don’t think she will after I have told her that it was really I who proposed to you, and that you would have refused me if you had had the strength of mind. Of course I ought to be ashamed of myself; but I am not very much ashamed. And you *must* bind me, please, because I mean to bind you. I couldn’t go away in peace unless you were publicly and formally bound.

‘Surely you are not afraid that I shall jilt you!’ said Matthew, laughing.

‘I don’t know. I was really afraid of Miss Frere—though I see you don’t believe me—and I am not sure that I am not a little afraid of her still. She is so very superior to me, you see!’

‘Ah, my dear, that isn’t the question. One doesn’t fall in love with superiority, though one may easily fall in love with one’s superiors. I am a shocking example of a man who has fallen in love with his social superior—’

Lilian stopped him by laying her finger upon his lips.

‘I can’t bear to hear you talk like that!’ she exclaimed. ‘In the first place, it isn’t true, and in the second place, social distinctions have nothing to say to you and me; we have got

beyond them. You are a thousand times too good for me—you know you are!’

‘I can’t imagine why you should think so.’

‘Anybody will tell you why; lots of people will tell you as soon as our engagement is announced.’

And it was in vain that Matthew protested against engagements and announcements. It was pointed out to him, with some show of reason, that an engagement which is not announced is practically no engagement at all, and that, since he chose to speak of dishonourable conduct, nothing can well be more dishonourable than an avowal of love, followed up by a refusal to face the legitimate consequences of such an avowal. Finally, he could only say that Lady Sara’s wishes in the matter must be paramount.

‘It is almost certain that she will forbid an engagement. I should, if I were in her place. But, whatever may happen, I shall not change; you may be sure of that.’

‘You think I shall change, then?’

‘I think it is absolutely essential that you should make sure,’ Matthew answered gravely. ‘You cannot be sure yet; you have seen nothing. All manner of things and people are waiting for you, and you will have to look at them.’

‘Oh, I shall have to go through this one season, I know; there is no help for that. Only I want everybody to understand that I am not free.’

Matthew smiled. There was no occasion to argue further against a stipulation which he knew in advance would be deemed—and rightly deemed—inadmissible. He had pleasanter sub-

jects than that to discourse upon during the remainder of the walk to Wilverton, at the end of which, as he could not but foresee, a very unpleasant quarter of an hour was in store for him.

CHAPTER XVI

LADY SARA'S SENTENCE

‘ARE you going to have it out with mamma at once?’ Lilian asked, when she and her affianced lover were standing on the door-step in Prospect Place.

‘Oh, yes,’ Matthew answered, with a rather rueful smile; ‘I think she ought to be told at once. You must be prepared for a scolding.’

‘I don’t feel much alarmed.’

‘Don’t you? Well, I must confess that I do. In fact, I am not sure that I have ever before in my life felt as thoroughly frightened as I do at this moment.’

The girl laughed, as she preceded him up the narrow staircase.

‘How funny you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘Why, what can poor mamma do to you? Besides, she is almost as fond of you as I am—only in a different way, of course.’

‘Ah! that doesn’t make things any easier!’ sighed Matthew.

But Lilian either did not hear or did not heed his ejaculation. She had opened the drawing-room door, had peeped through the aperture and now drew back.

‘Go and have your tooth out, while I take off my hat and jacket,’ she whispered; ‘I will be with you again in time to apply

cold water and burnt feathers in case you faint.' And so, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder and a gentle push, she dismissed him to make the best he could of a bad business.

He was very conscious indeed of its being a bad business as he advanced across the room towards the invalid-chair in which the unsuspecting Lady Sara reclined.

'So here you are at last!' said she cheerfully; 'what a time you have been! Do you find it too hot with the windows shut? I can't bring myself to give up fires yet.'

'I am hot; but it is with shame, not with the fire,' Matthew answered. 'Lady Sara, I have something to tell you which you will dislike extremely and which, I am afraid, will make you angry as well.'

The faded, emaciated woman in the *chaise-longue* started forward, clasping her fingers with a nervous, apprehensive movement. In the course of her life she had had to be told of a great many things which she had disliked extremely, although it cannot be said that anger was the emotion to which she had been most frequently moved by the hearing of them.

'What is it?' she asked quickly. 'Have you heard something about my sister, or—or any of the others?'

'No; the trouble is nearer home than that. It is better to speak out than to keep you in suspense, I think. Lady Sara, while I was walking back with your daughter this afternoon, I told her that I loved her, and she—well, I must not say that she accepted me, because she could not do that without your consent; but she wishes to accept me. Now you know the worst!'

He paused, thinking that the right of reply belonged to the

opposition; but for several seconds none was forthcoming. Lady Sara had drawn a long breath and had fallen back upon her cushions.

‘*You!*’ she ejaculated at length, in accents of the most profound amazement.

‘Oh, I know what a shock it must be to you. You have been deceived in me; I have abused a position of trust; I won’t attempt to excuse myself. All I can say is that nothing was farther from my intentions this morning than to act as I have done—and there is very little use in saying that now. Of course you cannot sanction an engagement.’

There was another protracted pause, at the end of which Lady Sara said,—

‘Mr Austin, do you yourself think that I ought to sanction it?’

‘No, I don’t,’ answered Matthew unhesitatingly; ‘I should not sanction it, if I were in your place, though my grounds for refusal might not be the same as yours. Personally, I can’t see the great importance of conventional degrees in rank; still, it must be admitted that, so long as they exist, they are not entirely meaningless, and I have tried always to remember, in associating with you, as I have done—’

‘Oh, it isn’t that!’ Lady Sara interrupted; ‘I wouldn’t for the world have you think that it was that! Of course your blood is quite as good as most people’s and a great deal better than that of a host of nobodies who are received everywhere because they are rich; but—but—’

‘But in any case, you couldn’t allow your daughter to take

such a leap in the dark ; you wouldn't be doing your duty to her unless you gave her at least the chance of making some more suitable choice. Isn't that what you mean ?'

Lady Sara supposed that was what she meant. A position so unassailable was, at all events, quite the best to take up, under the circumstances, and she was glad to be spared the painful task of dwelling upon subsidiary drawbacks. She listened tolerantly while Matthew entered upon a more ample avowal ; she had no reproaches to address to him ; she was not, to tell the truth, greatly surprised at his having lost his heart to her beautiful daughter, although the risk of his doing so had not happened to come within the range of her prevision. What astonished her beyond measure was that Lilian should have become enamoured of a man who, notwithstanding all his admirable qualities and the claims which he had established upon her gratitude, looked and behaved so very little like the subject of a romantic passion.

'I can't account for it,' she said, with touching candour ; 'it does seem so unnatural and improbable ! But perhaps she may have been carried away by her feelings, poor child, and by the admiration which I am sure you well deserve. She is impulsive at times, as all my family are. Unluckily,' added Lady Sara, sighing retrospectively, 'our impulses are apt to be soon driven out of sight and mind by fresh ones.'

Matthew could only assure her in reply that he had no desire to take advantage of Lilian's impulsiveness.

'I wish her to go away absolutely unfettered,' he declared. It stands to reason that that must be your wish also, and I

think you have shown very great kindness and forbearance in blaming me as little as you have done.'

'Oh, I don't blame you at all,' Lady Sara answered simply; 'most likely it wasn't in the least your fault. I can truly say that there is nobody in the world whom I would rather have had for a son-in-law, if only you had been richer and—and a little more in society. There are reasons which make it necessary for me to consider such things, and I certainly think, as you do, that Lilian ought to be left absolutely unfettered for the present.'

'But *I* don't think so,' said Lilian herself, who had slipped noiselessly into the room during her mother's speech and who now sank down upon a footstool beside the invalid-chair. 'You are very good and wise people, both of you,' she continued; 'only you don't happen to know me quite as well as I know myself. You might give me credit for knowing what I want, all the same.'

'Oh, my dear,' Lady Sara returned, stroking her daughter's copper-coloured hair, from which the flickering firelight drew gleams of gold, 'nobody doubts your knowing what you want *now*; the question is what you will want six months hence. There are so many things that one begins to feel the want of after one has seen other people in possession of them!'

The discussion went on in a curiously dispassionate style, Lady Sara and Matthew being the chief speakers and being as completely in accord as they were obviously in the right. At length Lilian started suddenly to her feet and, catching her submissive wooer by the coat-sleeve, said,—

'Come into the dining-room; I want to speak to you alone for a minute.'

Matthew obeyed, after casting an interrogative glance at Lady Sara, who made a sign of assent, and as soon as a passage and two solid partition walls had been placed between her and her mother, Lilian began,—

‘Matthew—oh, I wish your name wasn’t Matthew ; it sounds so ancient and righteous !—well, I must make the best of it, and I think I will call you Mat in future. Mat, then, do you love me ?’

‘Is there any need for you to ask that question ?’ he returned.

‘Most people would say there was, after the way in which you have been talking ; but never mind !—I believe you do. Now, as you love me, as you are a gentleman, as there isn’t a word to be said against you and as you are well enough off to marry—I suppose you are well enough off to marry ?’

‘Oh, I suppose so.’

‘Then there is no reason why our engagement should not be announced, except that you and mamma think I may meet somebody in London whom I shall like better.’

‘But we cannot announce what does not exist.’

‘The engagement *does* exist ; I have your promise and you have mine. Only you wish for secrecy, while I wish for publicity. Mind, I am not asking for anything formal ; all I want you to do is just to mention it, as I shall, to a few intimate friends—to Mr Jerome, for instance, when you write to him, and to the Freres and one or two others.’

Matthew smiled and shook his head.

‘It would be better not,’ he said. ‘Moreover, you must see that I couldn’t possibly do such a thing without your mother’s consent.’

'She will consent ; and even if she didn't—but she will.'

'If she does, of course I will willingly do as you wish. But I can't quite understand why you are so bent upon it.'

'You will understand still less after I have told you, I'm afraid. Or rather you will misunderstand—which is worse. My reason is, that I want to have something real and definite to take away with me. When I can't see you or talk to you any more, when everything and everybody about me will be so different, I may—I don't think it is likely, but I *may* come to feel as if all this had been a dream, as if it had happened to some girl whom I once knew, not to me myself. Do you ever have that feeling?'

'I think I have had something of the kind,' Matthew answered, keeping his countenance from falling by an effort ; 'but your reason isn't a convincing one. It is the very reason that I should have given for leaving you free.'

'Didn't I tell you that you would misunderstand ! Clever and wise as you are, Mat, there are things which seem to be beyond you, and I am much too stupid to explain them. However, it doesn't matter, now that you have agreed to do as I ask you, so long as mamma doesn't object. Come and hear me conquer all her objections.'

Not a little to Matthew's surprise, this task was accomplished almost without difficulty. During her daughter's brief absence Lady Sara had reflected, and had arrived at two conclusions : firstly, that the girl's fancy for Mr Austin was pretty sure to be short-lived, and secondly, that it would be a great mistake to stimulate that fancy by needless opposition. Therefore, after some slight show of reluctance, for form's sake, she said :

‘Very well, dear, let it be so. We have nothing to conceal, and perhaps no great harm will be done by our friends hearing the truth. The truth, of course, is that there is no actual engagement.’

But Lilian demurred to this way of putting things.

‘The engagement is as actual as anything can be,’ she declared; ‘only we are not proclaiming it yet, because you hope, or think, that it may be broken off before next August. If it hasn’t been broken off by then—’

‘Ah, well, it will be time enough to think about what is to happen next August when August comes,’ interrupted Lady Sara. Then she turned to Matthew and said: ‘I hope you don’t think me a very worldly and ungrateful old woman; I can but do my best according to my lights.’

‘I think you have been kindness and generosity itself,’ he replied emphatically.

And indeed, during the next few days, she showed herself in many respects worthy of his eulogy. Those were happy days for Matthew, in spite of the parting which was imminent; he was allowed to spend nearly the whole time that he could spare out of them with his betrothed; and Lady Sara, who came to tea with him on the last afternoon, spoke as though she anticipated revisiting his house at no very distant date. It was a delightful and spacious house, she remarked; no pleasanter home could be desired by persons of unambitious tastes.

The fact is that she was not ungrateful nor was she more worldly than education and experience had forced her to be. For her own part, she could have been happy enough as the

wife of a well-to-do country practitioner—always supposing that country practitioner to be so superior a specimen of the genus as Matthew Austin—but she had her doubts about Lilian, in whom she had long ago detected the existence of certain family characteristics, and she had an exaggerated appreciation of the advantages that belong to wealth. Upon the whole, her attitude towards her would-be son-in-law was rather one of benevolent neutrality than of obstructiveness. The course of events must settle his fate, she thought.

So when he helped her into the railway-carriage which was to bear her and her daughter away to the scene of the latter's prescribed ordeal, her leave-taking was almost affectionate. There were to be letters, constant letters, and in case of illness he would be summoned instantly. 'Because there is nobody in London or anywhere else like you!'

As for Lilian, she had bidden farewell to her lover in a less public spot than a railway-station. All she had to say to him now was :

'Remember the Freres are to be told, and other people are not to be contradicted, if they ask questions. Oh, and by the way,' she added, as an after-thought, 'don't forget to write to your friend Mr Jerome. I think he foresaw what was coming, and he is sure to be pleased.'

END OF VOL. I.

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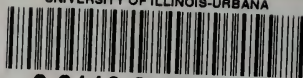
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